



invited

Exploring Genuine Christian Invitation

About Invited

Invited is a written resource intended to be used by groups and communities to help foster conversation about and exploration into the breadth and length and depth of invitation.

Invited came out of a working group called Spirit of Invitation within the Diocese of Toronto that was tasked with exploring new ways of encouraging Anglicans to be more invitational. You might say that we're a group of people who stumbled upon an exciting idea. The Spirit of Invitation team is a diverse group of about 10 people from all kinds of different backgrounds, ordained and lay, working together to explore the concept of invitation. The group is co-chaired by **Jeff Potter** and the Rev. Canon **Mark Kinghan**.

Some friends of ours – the Rev. Canon **Susan Bell**, *Canon Missioner of the Diocese of Toronto*, and the Rev. Dr. **Judy Paulsen**, *Professor of Evangelism at Wycliffe College* – co-authored the written resource.

Invited is also a series of short films. Scripts for each of the videos were written by **Jeff Potter** and **Nate Wall**. And **Nicholas Bradford-Ewart**, award-winning filmmaker extraordinaire of Farmer Vision Media, adapted our scripts and helped us to put the videos together.

All of the Invited resources, including the short films, can be viewed and downloaded at **www.spiritofinvitation.com**. For more information, feel free to send us an email at **info@spiritofinvitation.com**

Spirit of Invitation gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Diocese of Toronto through the Our Faith Our Hope program.

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A Note about this Written Resource:

In these six sessions, you'll find a variety of material including topics for discussion, scripture study, prayer and reflection. We've provided a structure that we think makes sense, and identified rough estimates of how much time you might want to allocate to each section. But, and we can't stress this enough, *invitation is always contextual*. Please feel free to really engage with the material, mix up the order, and spend more or less time in any given section.

A Note about using the Video Series:

The Invited video series is intended to be used alongside the written resource, but it very deliberately doesn't always cover the same thematic ground. We've suggested a spot in each session where you might watch it, but we haven't carved out a specified period of time for discussion, or identified specific discussion questions. Our hope is that you will allow the videos to raise new questions and perhaps take the conversation in new directions.

Please feel free to watch them whenever you like (and as often as you like), and make use of the liner notes that go with each episode if you want additional thoughts and questions to discuss. The videos and the liner notes can be viewed or downloaded at www.spiritofinvitation.com

An important note to program facilitators:

- This program assumes a time frame of 2 hours, and so is best held as a stand-alone event, rather than following a worship service or some other gathering.
- In order to give participants time to read through the introduction, please distribute it invite everyone to read it through prior to participating in the first session.
- Provide a warm welcome to participants and encourage everyone to be involved. No preparation is required, other than reading through the introduction.
- Remind the participants that the accompanying videos can be viewed at www.spiritofinvitation.com. If the videos are used as part of the study program, they would be best viewed just prior to the closing prayer.
- Supplementary material is included in the appendices, such as a brief summary of the introduction below, which might be helpful to read at the beginning of each session, especially if there are new people present.

The Introduction contains key foundational assumptions that underlie all of the sessions. For this reason it would be helpful if it were read by each person prior to beginning the first session. The six sessions which make up this discussion course are ideally led in small groups of 6 to 8 people, to allow for ample participation by all. It may be helpful for participants to review the summary of the Introduction found in the appendix, prior to each of the sessions, so that newcomers are made aware of these key foundational assumptions, and all participants are reminded of them.

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Introduction

***Grace and peace to you
in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!***

If you are reading this introduction, no doubt something has brought you to this point.

Perhaps it's hope that what you find here will be the "magic bullet" for your church's falling "Average Sunday Attendance".

Perhaps you are reading this introduction out of a sense of obligation – a need to check out the latest thing – but all the while feeling more pessimistic than optimistic about the chances for success.

But perhaps, and let us pray this is the case despite our conscious reasoning, perhaps the Spirit of God has led you to read something, and do something, different.

If that is so, let's begin this journey with thanks: thanks to our Creator and creative God who is always out ahead of us doing new things among his children: seeking new ways to form life-altering relationships and enliven our hearts.

But back to you.

We suspect that you know that you need to do something different too. Christians – and particularly those belonging to mainline denominations,

are very aware that times have changed and with those changing times so has the whole landscape of faith. Most denominations have seen a decline in church attendance in recent decades with the result that many, even perhaps all, established churches are experiencing the ramifications of fewer people in Christian communities: fewer Christians to contribute their time and their talents to the work of the church. This has also resulted in fewer resources – monetary and otherwise – on the ground to support professional ministry and further the work of the institutional church. The fact is the vast majority of Canadians no longer attend church.

In addition, the rules of engagement have changed for those who do attend our churches. What we have been doing to attract membership in our various denominations is no longer as effective as it once was.

This landscape has also changed. Be it because of the bewildering menu of secular programming available, the pace of post-modern life, the democratized and diffuse religious arena, or any number of reasons, the reality is, Church attendance is slipping and any remaining vestiges of Christendom are crumbling and there's no doubt that this is unsettling, perhaps even alarming to many of us.

But there is good news: because of all these changes, a new mission field has opened up. There is a large demographic to whom we can offer the good news of the Gospel. They consist of the unchurched (those who have had no previous experience of or contact with the institutional church) and the de-churched (those who have quit our communities for a variety of reasons). These folks are just like you and me – they have a spiritual hunger and are seeking to satisfy it in different ways.

So we'd like to propose a different way to consider our situation. First, we'd like to propose that we stop bemoaning the fate of Christendom, and instead see it as a time when we didn't have to exercise our whole Christian identity; a time in which discipleship was considered equivalent to church attendance; a time in which we didn't have to tell the Christian story because everyone knew it.

We propose that we begin to re-tool and re-fit ourselves for our new reality

To begin we can remember. We can recall who we are as Christians and to whom we belong.

Second, we propose that we begin to re-tool and re-fit ourselves for our new reality.

This is a reality that yokes the seemingly incompatible facts of declining church attendance with an expressed hunger and yearning for spirituality and some kind of relationship with the living God among the demographic mentioned above.

So, if this is the new shape of our reality with the great majority of people, what can we, as committed Christians walking in the way of Jesus, do to address it?

To begin we can remember. We can recall who we are as Christians and to whom we belong. From our earliest beginnings we have been a sent people and the purpose of our sending is to invite others into communion with God. But most importantly, we can recall what a spirit of invitation has meant in our own journeys of faith. We can remember that inviting people to be with God is a recovery of who we all are as people who follow Jesus. Invitation involves everyone – it is not the purview of the gifted few, not just for the clergy, not just for specific lay-leaders but it is every Christian's responsibility - and gift. You do not need to be a "professional" to share your faith. Being theologically articulate is great, but it's not a pre-requisite for speaking about our relationship with God. We all come to

Christ and can share something of Christ in our own language and ways.

However, at this point, we have to pause and ask ourselves some important questions: *What are we inviting people to?*

Are we inviting people to a community that has forgotten who it is and its purpose for being? To a community that is scared for its survival and is now inviting out of a sense of worry and fear?

Or are we inviting people into a loving relationship with God: the same God that loves us so much, cares about us so much that he can number every hair on our heads? Are we inviting people to learn and join the Way of Jesus Christ? A way that welcomes all, loves all, teaches all and redeems all?

We *can* be a people who invite in this way: a generous people, a loving people; a people committed to the Good News of Jesus Christ, who share the message of the Gospel and invite others into the love of the triune God.

But beware. If we once admit this new reality and embrace invitation, our generous and creative God will use that chance to re-form us, to create something new.

Beware because that will involve change: in ourselves, in our communities, in our comfortable – or uncomfortable, as the case may be – pews. God is good, but God is not wedded to the status quo. Instead, the Father sent his only Son that we might have everlasting life. And that sole priority may mean that we have to give some things up for the sake of the One who loves us that much.

*"This is what God says,
the God who builds a road right through the
ocean,
who carves a path through pounding waves, . . .
"Forget about what's happened;
don't keep going over old history.
Be alert, be present. I'm about to do something
brand-new.
It's bursting out! Don't you see it?"*

(Isaiah 43: 16,19, The Message)

So if you are eager to go on this journey with the Lord, consider the next six modules of exploration and teaching as a way to begin a different conversation, one that will put us in a creative space – one that will get us moving out into our neighbourhoods and cities to find out what God is doing in the lives of all his children!

But beware. If we once admit this new reality and embrace invitation, our generous and creative God will use that chance to re-form us, to create something new.

Core Assumptions of these Sessions:

- ✓ *We offer the love of God out of the overflow of what we ourselves have been given and experienced.*
- ✓ *We offer this invitation from a community into a community – this is not an individualistic evangelism course.*
- ✓ *The process of invitation is grounded in relationships.*
- ✓ *Invitation is a process that often happens over time.*
- ✓ *Invitation is not a program, it is an attitude of heart and mind.*
- ✓ *Offering an invitation is grounded in the Christian family story.*
- ✓ *These sessions are based upon an adult learning model that involves discussion and application, and a serious study of scripture.*

Invited is a parish/congregation-based resource that we hope will inspire and equip Christians to share their faith, and to invite their family, friends, colleagues and neighbours to explore a relationship with God for themselves.

Drawing on stories from people's lives today, together with stories of invitation from the Bible, we hope you'll be excited by and grow in comfort with sharing the good news of the gospel.

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A few additional notes:

Leader:

The modules are designed with a leader for each group. This need not be one person: the designation can be shared by two or three or the whole group. It would be best if, when sharing the role, this is determined beforehand so that the leaders can be prepared for their contribution. There are several opportunities for full involvement in the discussions and leadership of each module.

Timing:

Each module is designed to be 2 hours in length. The leader or someone else appointed will have to keep an eye on timing – particularly during open discussion points. However, it's important to note that the timing need not be rigid and if fruitful discussion is happening at one point, the time could be made up at other points.

SPECIAL NOTE

Please do not truncate the time allocated at the beginning or the end of the modules for prayer. Prayer is crucial to the ability of the group to engage in discernment and deep thought.

Why The Message?

Scripture passages included in the sessions are taken from *The Message*, a contemporary translation of the Old and New Testaments. Like any translation it has its weaknesses, but we consider it a helpful text in many ways. Principally we believe its colloquial rendering of the text succeeds in making our very familiar biblical stories sound somewhat unfamiliar. This has the result of provoking a fresh look at the scripture and hearing it again as a story. However, if you dislike using this translation, please feel free to use the NRSV or any other version you like.

Language for God:

We have chosen to use the traditional language for the triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, preferring to see that language as an expression of the relationality and unity of the three members of the Trinity, rather than a gendered and therefore exclusively male expression of God. It is the authors' preference, but you are certainly free to adapt this language to your own preference.

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Session 1



*The session begins with a time of greeting – perhaps with refreshments.
When the group is ready, the leader proceeds with the opening prayers:*

Opening Prayers:

Leader: In prayer, in quiet, let's bring the concerns of our day
before God for a few minutes before we start.

(Short silence)

Leader: Ask yourself: what was/is the most challenging thing I
faced today? What's still on my mind? Where did I see
the Lord working in those moments?

Think about that for a minute, and ask God to hold those
concerns for you – relieve you of their weight for a short
time.

(Medium silence)



*APPROX.
10 min
or as long as
needed.*

Leader: Now ask yourself: what was the easiest and happiest thing about today? Where did I see the Lord working in those moments?

Think about that for a minute or two and again, let's give thanks to God for those things.

(Short silence)

Leader: And now, let's offer both our challenges and our joys to God to hold for a few hours while we seek his will for our time in this group.

(Short silence)

Then, the leader prays the following:

Leader: **Father, bless this time. Help us to press 'pause' on any worries that accompany us to this group – just for a time.**

(Short silence)

Bless all we think and say today/tonight - to your honour. Be in us as we consider how our relationship with you impacts our daily lives, and our family and community life. Bring us deeper and deeper into your peace and your love. And light a small flame of warmth, of hope and encouragement in us all for your church.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Focus Question: **Why invite?**


APPROX.
30 - 45 min.

Leader reads the following introduction:

Sharing faith.

Sometimes this brings to mind negative images, of being accosted by strangers on the street or pressured by people on your doorstep. But inviting the people in your life to explore faith doesn't need to be awkward or offensive. We'll be discussing more about what such an invitation can look like in upcoming sessions. For now though, forget about what inviting might involve you doing. Instead let's first focus on this question:

“Why would a person invite the people they know to explore faith?”

If we think about it, there are probably several answers to this question.

On one level, Christians throughout the centuries have shared their faith because they believe the Christian story of God's love and reconciliation made known to the world through Christ, to be true (and amazing!). The *truth* of the gospel itself is reason to invite.

On another level, they have shared the faith out of *obedience* to one of Jesus' clearest instructions. He told his first followers to “go 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 I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (*Matthew 28:19 & 20*). Today, with so many Canadians no longer having any idea what the Christian faith really is, it's time again to take seriously this straight-forward command of Jesus.

On still another level though, people have *naturally* invited the people they care about to explore Christian faith because in that faith they themselves have experienced something profound and wonderful. They invite others because they themselves have, in some way, been changed for the better.

Have someone in the group read aloud the following paragraphs about the lives of several everyday people. Consider, in these little vignettes, how faith changed the way these people saw themselves, their lives, and the world around them.

Do you recognize yourself in any of these stories?

MARY

For a number of pretty dark reasons, Mary grew up believing she wasn't worth much. This belief had seeped into many parts of her life; sometimes sabotaging her relationships. This in turn had harmed everything from her career to her marriage and even her parenting. Then Mary began to learn what it meant to be loved (and gifted) by the Maker of the universe.

MAGGIE

Maggie, knew perfectly well she was socially awkward. She never seemed to fit in. Yet, oddly, she was beginning to feel accepted, despite her awkwardness. Her church was made up of all sorts of people, with all sorts of idiosyncrasies, who together were learning about, worshipping, and serving God.

BRENT

Brent had reached the pinnacle of his career but somehow felt an odd disappointment; emptiness, even. Surely there was something more than this? Slowly, he began to grasp a deeper meaning. He was invited to be part of something called the Kingdom of God.

CHAD

Chad, facing chemo, experienced an inexplicable comfort in the midst of the exhaustion and fear. He was astonished at how much it helped to know people were thinking of him, and praying for him.

ANDRE

Andre now recognized that he'd made decisions that had deeply hurt a number of people; many of them being people he really loved. While it was something of a relief to finally admit this, he wondered if he could ever make things right again. Lately though, he'd begun to grasp that with God we all get another chance.

OXANA

Oxana was surprised by the peace she felt growing. It was new. Little by little she was learning why Jesus taught it was so important to forgive, and how to begin to do that. She was finally beginning to let go of the past.

Have someone else read aloud the following reflection on the above contemporary narratives, while others read along:

Mary, Brent, Andre, Maggie, Chad and Oxana were all experiencing some sort of new life as a result of their faith. It was the most natural thing in the world for them to want to tell the people they loved about this. It was like someone in the desert finding a pool of fresh water!

The gospel, translated literally, means **good news**. It's good news that, while rooted in the story of Jesus Christ, shows up in many different ways in the stories of everyday people's lives.

In short, the Good News results in lots of good news.

All change and grow in some way. For some people faith results in their finding a deep meaning to life. Others experience forgiveness, comfort, or a new sense of worth. Still others are challenged to face something they've long denied, or let go of something they've been clinging to. In every case, coming into Christian faith means a sort of death that gives way to new life. Jesus described this as, "being born from above" to a man who came to him to ask about what faith was really all about (*John 3:3-7*). This new life that Jesus spoke about, shows up in all kinds of ways in people's lives.

These various forms of good news are a direct result of the good news people have found in coming to faith.

"This new life that Jesus spoke about, shows up in all kinds of ways in people's lives."

The amazing thing is that the good news of the gospel isn't just about bringing good news to individual lives. It's also good news for society as a whole, as our shared life is also transformed. Our faith, rooted in the Triune God, teaches us how to find and value unity while celebrating each person's particularity. Many people offering their various gifts, talents and passions together to benefit all. Marginalized people welcomed in, cared for and also recognized as a blessing. Relationships strengthened. Ethical business practices nurtured.

The Good News, results in many forms of good news, in both individuals and the world around them.

Group Discussion:

How have you seen faith change someone?

How has your faith been good news in your life?

Describe one way that Sunday affects Monday in your life?



APPROX.
45 min.

Scripture Study:

Two encounters with Jesus

Have someone in your group read aloud John 4:1-26

The Woman at the Well

Jesus realized that the Pharisees were keeping count of the baptisms that he and John performed (although his disciples, not Jesus, did the actual baptizing). They had posted the score that Jesus was ahead, turning him and John into rivals in the eyes of the people. So Jesus left the Judean countryside and went back to Galilee.

To get there, he had to pass through Samaria. He came into Sychar, a Samaritan village that bordered the field Jacob had given his son Joseph. Jacob's well was still there. Jesus, worn out by the trip, sat down at the well. It was noon.

A woman, a Samaritan, came to draw water. Jesus said, “Would you give me a drink of water?” (His disciples had gone to the village to buy food for lunch.)

The Samaritan woman, taken aback, asked, “How come you, a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?” (Jews in those days wouldn’t be caught dead talking to Samaritans.)

Jesus answered, “If you knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would be asking me for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water.”

The woman said, “Sir, you don’t even have a bucket to draw with, and this well is deep. So how are you going to get this ‘living water’? Are you a better man than our ancestor Jacob, who dug this well and drank from it, he and his sons and livestock, and passed it down to us?”

Jesus said, “Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again and again. Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst—not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life.”

The woman said, “Sir, give me this water so I won’t ever get thirsty, won’t ever have to come back to this well again!”

He said, “Go call your husband and then come back.”

“I have no husband,” she said.

“That’s nicely put: ‘I have no husband.’ You’ve had five husbands, and the man you’re living with now isn’t even your husband. You spoke the truth there, sure enough.”

“Oh, so you’re a prophet! Well, tell me this: Our ancestors worshiped God at this mountain, but you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place for worship, right?”

“Believe me, woman, the time is coming when you Samaritans will worship the Father neither here at this mountain nor there in Jerusalem. You worship guessing in the dark; we Jews worship in the clear light of day. God’s way of salvation

**“If you
knew the
generosity
of God and
who I am,
you would be
asking me for
a drink”**

is made available through the Jews. But the time is coming—it has, in fact, come—when what you’re called will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter.

“It’s who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That’s the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.”

The woman said, “I don’t know about that. I do know that the Messiah is coming. When he arrives, we’ll get the whole story.”

“I am he,” said Jesus. “You don’t have to wait any longer or look any further.”

(John 4:1-26, *The Message*)

What are the changes you see in this woman, over the course of her encounter with Jesus?

How do you think her view of herself changes?

How do her actions effect changes in the whole community?

Have someone else in your group read aloud Luke 19:1-10:

Jesus and Zacchaeus

Then Jesus entered and walked through Jericho. There was a man there, his name Zacchaeus, the head tax man and quite rich. He wanted desperately to see Jesus, but the crowd was in his way—he was a short man and couldn't see over the crowd. So he ran on ahead and climbed up in a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus when he came by.

When Jesus got to the tree, he looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, hurry down. Today is my day to be a guest in your home.” Zacchaeus scrambled out of the tree, hardly believing his good luck, delighted to take Jesus home with him. Everyone who saw the incident was indignant and grumped, “What business does he have getting cozy with this crook?”

Zacchaeus just stood there, a little stunned. He stammered apologetically, “Master, I will give away half my income to the poor—and if I’m caught cheating, I will pay four times the damages.”

Jesus said, “Today is salvation day in this home! Here he is: Zacchaeus, son of Abraham! For the Son of Man came to find and restore the lost.”

(Luke 19:1-10, The Message)

Take a few minutes to jot down some point-form reflections on the following questions:

- What are the changes you see in this man, over the course of his encounter with Jesus?

- How do you think his view of himself changed?

- How did his actions change?

- How would these changes effect change in the whole community?

[Leader reads]

These passages show so clearly that Jesus cares deeply about human brokenness, and that He brings transformation to people by changing the way they see themselves, and by leading them to new ways of behaving. Through these changes, Jesus brings about changes in the world around each person He transforms.

The Church, as a community with Jesus at its center, teaches and lives by different (and some would say peculiar) values, goals and practices. By our shared life, we together show the difference that faith makes.

In short, *faith changes things*. People are changed. The way they live their lives is changed. And as a result, so is their surrounding context.



APPROX.
15 min.

Reflection **Going Deeper**

Reflect privately about how has your faith has changed the way you see, understand and feel about:

➤ **Your worth as a person**

➤ **The meaning or purpose of life**

➤ **Your sense of place in the community**

➤ **The mistakes and failures of your past**

➤ **How you navigate through the struggles and challenges in life**


➤ **Your gifts, talents and passions**

Leader invites one or two people to share briefly something from their reflection.

Video Content

Watch “Invited - Episode 1: Table”

Episode 1: Table, and all of the Invited video content, can be found at www.spiritofinvitation.com

 DON'T FORGET
TO CHECK OUT THE
LINER NOTES THAT GO
WITH THIS EPISODE.
YOU'LL FIND THEM
ONLINE.

Concluding Reflection and Prayer

Leader: Tonight/today, we've explored the idea that being a Christian entails being transformed; not according to some recipe, or all at once, but transformed nonetheless. This transformation is about new life that grows in us as a result of our relationship with the Living God.

If by chance you're here tonight and you've never accepted God's invitation into relationship, this would be a wonderful time to do that. (*All you need to do is say a simple 'yes' to God.*) But perhaps you're someone who has walked a long time with God. Have you reflected on how He has transformed you? Do you recognize this as good news worth sharing?

Let's take a few moments to offer up these thoughts, the movements of our hearts in quiet.

(short silence)

Leader: As we think about what we talked about, what has most engaged you about our discussions tonight/today? Where did you see God active? What is one thing that you can take away and pray about, or act on?

(short silence)

Leader: Let's take a moment and give thanks to the Lord for that insight.

(short silence)

Leader: Now, what has most disturbed you about our discussions tonight/today? Where did you see God active in the disturbance? What is the thing you can take away and pray about, or act on?

(short silence)

Leader: Even if it's made you uncomfortable, disturbed you, try and thank God for that disturbance anyway. Sometimes the discomfort is there to teach us something – to give us a gift.

(short silence)

Leader: Father, thank you that a living relationship with you brings purpose & meaning, comfort, forgiveness, hope and community. We thank you now (either silently or aloud) for the way you've been transforming us.

(period of silence to allow others to speak or add their thanks silently)

Leader: May this good news, of new life and transformation, be a powerful reason to share the hope that is within us. May it well up and spill over to all those around us that have yet to come to know you.
We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Let's say the Grace together:

All: **The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all forevermore. Amen.**



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Session 2



*The session begins with a time of greeting – perhaps with refreshments.
When the group is ready, the leader proceeds with the opening prayers:*

Opening Prayers:

Leader: In prayer, in quiet, let's bring the concerns of our day before God for a few minutes before we start.

(Short silence)

Leader: Ask yourself: what was/is the most challenging thing I faced today? What's still on my mind? Where did I see the Lord working in those moments?

Think about that for a minute, and ask God to hold those concerns for you – relieve you of their weight for a short time.

(Medium silence)



*APPROX.
10 min
or as long as
needed.*

Leader: Now ask yourself: what was the easiest and happiest thing about today? Where did I see the Lord working in those moments?

Think about that for a minute or two and again, let's give thanks to God for those things.

(short silence)

Leader: And now, let's offer both our challenges and our joys to God to hold for a few hours while we seek his will for our time in this group.

(short silence)

All: **God of Grace and Love, thank you for opening our eyes to the places where you're at work. Thank you for showing up in unexpected places, working through unexpected people and accomplishing unexpected things. You are always taking us by surprise. Help us to look for you, seek you and see you and your works. Help us to work with you – to join your mission for your church. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

Focus Question:

Whose invitation is it?

Leader:

Tonight's/today's focus specifically deals with the question: **Whose invitation is it anyway?**

Let's move to our scripture study to explore how invitation is played out there.

Scripture Study:

A model of invitation.




APPROX.
45 min.

Have someone in your group read aloud John 1:43-51

Jesus Calls Philip and Nathanael

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!' Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?' Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.' Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!' Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

 PLEASE NOTE
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Questions

1. Who does the inviting in this story?
2. How would you describe the way that Jesus and Philip invite?
3. What does Jesus invite Philip and then Nathanael to do?
What does Philip invite Nathanael to do?
4. Who are the disciples?

Reflection Going Deeper

Leader: Take a few minutes to think through the following quietly:

1. What is important in this story?
2. Are there any principles of invitation that we can take away from it?

The Leader then invites one or two people to share something from their reflection.

Rooting the Invitation Invitation in Our Lives:


APPROX.
45 min.

A group member reads the contemporary narrative below:

The Rediscovery of our Identity as the Sent Ones

Sheila had, over the course of her life, been asked many times why she was so happy. It wasn't that she didn't experience un-happiness at times, but that in the general run of things – when life was ordinarily moving along – she was happy; and seemed able and willing to extend herself, her time and even her finances to help when these things were needed. She had a sense that this was all connected to her faith in Jesus Christ and her membership in her church family. The well of security and love she experienced in these things freed her to feel and act as she did. But she'd never invited anyone into that relationship herself, she'd kind of kept it all to herself. Not intentionally mind you, just because. Partly, it was because she didn't really feel like it was something she should do – wasn't that the minister's job? Partly, she was reticent. She hadn't really talked out loud about her own faith to anyone. Partly, it felt like a risk to her relationships.

And yet, . . . and yet, the bible stories she read each week in church to refresh her faith were full of stories of Jesus and his disciples

showing God's love to people through healing and serving and offering invitations to believe, to come and follow him, to understand even more what the love of God looks and feels like . . .

But that was Jesus. Not her.

However, during that time of year that her church read the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, she couldn't escape the conclusion that talking to people about Jesus and inviting them to follow him in a gathered community of fellow followers, was what being a Christian was all about. That well of love and security she'd always experienced was supposed to be passed on!

But it was a part of her faith life that she hadn't quite come to terms with. And yet, people kept on asking her that question: why did she seem different . . .

Perhaps that was the place to start the conversation?

Questions:

1. Does Sheila's experience resonate with your own?
2. Why or why not?

Further thoughts:

Leader:

When thinking about inviting the people we know into a relationship with the living Christ, it's possible that we experience some anxiety. Perhaps sharing our deepest beliefs is not something we're used to; perhaps we fear a negative reaction to our disclosure. These are natural feelings.

That is, if we think it's all up to us.

But what if it isn't?

What if in fact, we are not responsible for coming up with all the answers, what if we are simply joining something that God already has in hand?

What if it was in the very nature of God to invite everyone – everyone – into community?

What if we are simply making an invitation on behalf of our Lord?

The whole idea of invitation in the first place, is grounded in the idea of God's mission [*the Missio Dei*] – God's sending of himself in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in order to invite us into a relationship with him; a relationship that seeks to call the best from us, to light us up from within with the light of God.

And in turn, as Jesus is sent, so he then sends us in the power of the Spirit: Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' (*John 20:21-22*)

**And in turn,
as Jesus is
sent, so he
then sends us**

And the invitation we offer to our sisters and brothers in the name of God is rooted in this sending. But it's grounded in something else too: the acknowledgement that invitation is not so much something we do, but that we, as the community gathered by God embody a spirit of invitation. We are meant to be, in our own being, the very essence of invitation. To put it another way, a spirit of invitation is in our DNA as children of God.

I suppose you could say that because God invited us, so we now invite others – as a response to that first loving act. God is constantly active in

the world, offering that invitation. And we, as the face and hands of Christ are commissioned to invite people into the transforming, shaping and blessing that occurs in loving relationship with God. It's an invitation into the love of God; into a community gathered around all those good things; into that peace that the Lord promises in relationship with the Holy Spirit.

We invite people out of the abundance of what we ourselves have been given by Jesus Christ. Our cup runs over with the love and the mercy and the 'at-homeness' of God and it's that which we want to share with everyone we meet.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. (1 Peter 2:9)

**We invite
people out of
the abundance
of what we
ourselves have
been given by
Jesus Christ.**

Reflection:

Real life stories



APPROX.
15 min.

Leader:


Take a few minutes to read through the following questions and to think about how you might respond:

- ➡ **Can you remember when you first encountered God in your own life? What were the circumstances?**

- ➡ **It's sometimes in moments of great joy or great pain that people have the clarity of an encounter with God; can you think of such an instance in the life of someone you know?**

- ➡ **Do you think these events are God's invitations to a relationship with him?**

Leader invites a couple of members of the group to offer their responses to these questions.

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Video Content

Watch “Invited - Episode 2: Home”

Episode 2: Home, and all of the Invited video content, can be found at www.spiritofinvitation.com

Concluding Reflection and Prayer

Leader: Tonight/today, we've explored the idea that God does the inviting: that the Lord is out in front of us, loving people, serving people, healing people, offering himself to the world. He's already at work in people's lives.

We've begun to discern how it is that we can continue that work; to be the face and hands of Christ in our world; to continue to – as a Christian community – invite people into God's midst.

Let's take a few moments to offer up these thoughts, the movements of our hearts in quiet.

(short silence)

Leader: As we think about what we talked about, what has most engaged you about our discussions tonight/today? Where did you see God active? What is one thing that you can take away and pray about, or act on?

(short silence)

Leader: Let's take a moment and give thanks to the Lord for that insight.

(short silence)

Leader: Now, what has most disturbed you about our discussions tonight/today? Where did you see God active in the disturbance? What is the thing you can take away and pray about, or act on?

(short silence)

Leader: Even if it's made you uncomfortable, disturbed you, try and thank God for that disturbance anyway. Sometimes the discomfort is there to teach us something – to give us a gift.

(short silence)

Leader: Loving God,

You are continually calling to people everywhere in the ordinariness of their daily lives: while at work in your world, in their families, and in the midst of the many things they do each day. You are there first, loving and offering the depth and warmth of a relationship with you.

We are thankful for this and all your gifts.
Amen.

And now let's say the Grace together:

All: The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all forevermore. Amen.



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Session 3



*The session begins with a time of greeting – perhaps with refreshments.
When the group is ready, the leader proceeds with the opening prayers:*



APPROX.
10 min
or as long as
needed.

Opening Prayers:

Leader: In prayer, in quiet, let's bring the concerns of our day before God for a few minutes before we start.

(Short silence)

Leader: Ask yourself: what was/is the most challenging thing I faced today? What's still on my mind? Where did I see the Lord working in those moments?

Think about that for a minute, and ask God to hold those concerns for you – relieve you of their weight for a short time.

(Medium silence)

Leader: Now ask yourself: what was the easiest and happiest thing about today? Where did I see the Lord working in those moments?

Think about that for a minute or two and again, let's give thanks to God for those things.

(short silence)

Leader: And now, let's offer both our challenges and our joys to God to hold for a few hours while we seek his will for our time in this group.

(short silence)

All: Lord, your voice nudges us, prepares us, opens us to the possibility of your work in us. Strengthen us for the work of invitation. Help us to have the ears to hear and the eyes to see where you are working – where you are present in peoples' lives and then give us the courage to let nothing get in the way of that invitation. Bless this time for our use and your glory. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Focus Question: ***So Who is Invited?***


APPROX.
30 - 45 min.

Leader reads the following introduction:

So who does God invite into relationship with himself, and into the transformation that results from knowing Him?

We may quickly answer “*Well, everyone of course!*” And we’d be right. God wants everyone to come to know Him and experience His transforming love.

On the ground, however, our actions often say something different than this quick answer. Sometimes the way we live our lives, both as individual Christians and as communities of faith, suggests God is most interested in inviting people who are ...well, a lot like us. People already

familiar with Christian practices, culture and language. Like-minded people who already know how things work in the church (or even our brand of church), and already know how to behave there.

But what about the people we may think of as ‘outsiders’? People who themselves don’t believe they ‘belong’ in a church? What about people who think God wouldn’t want anything to do with them, given their past (or present)? As Christians, should we steer clear of inviting people of other beliefs into conversations about faith? What about people of no belief, or people who have a pretty jaded view of Christianity?

On the ground, however, our actions often say something different

In this session we’ll be focusing on *who it is that God invites*.

Have some members in the group read aloud the following paragraphs:

LIZ

As a child Liz went to Brownies in a neighbourhood church, but she hasn’t been inside a church building in decades. Now busy with commuting all week to her job in the city, and getting the kids to soccer & dance lessons on weekends (along with all the other chores) church simply never crosses her mind. She’s currently worried about her son Jake, who’s been diagnosed with a learning problem. She thinks she should probably join a gym to lose some weight, but she doesn’t know where she’d find the time to go. Sunday morning is really the only time during the week when as a family they aren’t rushing out the door.

JOSH

Josh and his girlfriend have moved into one of the new condos near the lake. They’d met at university and now have both landed jobs in the city. Their families live a few hours away, but several of their friends live in the downtown core too. There’s a big old church about a block from their condo building. It gives a nice, retro ambience to the neighbourhood, but they don’t really know what goes on there. Is it even open during the week?

BRENT

Brent was in a car accident six years ago. His doctor put him on heavy duty pain killers to cope with his pain from the whip-lash. When he tried to cut back on them he just couldn't. When he was finally supposed to return to work he tried to act as if everything was normal but his drug problem came out and he was fired. Now he and his wife and two kids live with his elderly father-in-law. At least he's on a methadone program now, but things aren't good at home. Money is a constant problem. He's been referred to a foodbank at a church nearby. He hates going, and he certainly wouldn't dream of showing up on a Sunday.

MEL

Mel, an artist in her twenties, considers herself a free-thinker, but also a spiritual person, in a private sort of way. To her, the word 'church' mostly means an outdated and restrictive institution, with a less-than-stellar past. She goes to yoga twice a week and is thinking about joining a book club.

WALLY

Wally stopped going to church years ago after his wife's death. A few years back he was missing it and decided to go. He got as far as the parking lot, but then drove back home. He's not sure if he'd be welcome after all this time, and anyway, there's a new minister/

AGGIE

Aggie's memory started to fail her the year after she buried Frank. Now her kids want her to move out of her house. This morning she forgot where she kept the eggs. She still has her sense of humour though, so she's learned to laugh it off. A friend called her this morning and told her about a craft group that meets at a nearby church. Her doctor had told her it would do her good to get out and be with other people. But those people have probably all known each other for years.

KYLE

Kyle is the wild-child of the family, and at 4 is both adorable and utterly exhausting. He loves to run, and climbs on pretty much everything. His parents have just enrolled him in soccer and martial arts. For half an hour each day, if he's not had too many time-outs, he is allowed to play his favorite video game. He has never heard the words 'God', 'Jesus' or 'church'.

priest/pastor/vicar/incumbent now (he never knows what to call those people). He heard some things had changed. Would he know when to do what? Would anyone still recognize him?

Have someone else read the following reflection aloud, while others read along:

In Canada, over 80% of people say they believe there is a God, but fewer than 20% have any regular association with a community of faith. Many people, with little to no interest in attending church, have opinions and questions about religion and/or spirituality. Some of them, if given a chance, would like to explore their questions. Others actually have a deep spiritual yearning, but may not even have fully identified it as such.

**Some of them,
if given a chance,
would like to explore
their questions**

God loves all of these people, and desires for them to know Him, no matter where they are on their spiritual journey.

As Christians, we believe that God is always calling people into relationship with Himself. He knows and loves them more than anyone else, and longs to bring into their lives new life in all its various forms (some of which we explored in session #1).

Sometimes, however, we in the Church get so focused on ourselves that we forget that we've been blessed in order to bless others. We forget the people who don't yet know God, or know that He loves them.

Group Discussion:

1. Who do you know in your life who has little to no contact with the church?
2. Share your experience of someone in this category who also expressed opinions or questions on spiritual or philosophical issues.

Scripture Study:

Two very different people encounter Jesus:


APPROX.
45 min.

Have someone in your group read aloud Luke 7:36-50

Anointing His Feet

One of the Pharisees asked him over for a meal. He went to the Pharisee's house and sat down at the dinner table. Just then a woman of the village, the town harlot, having learned that Jesus was a guest in the home of the Pharisee, came with a bottle of very expensive perfume and stood at his feet, weeping, raining tears on his feet. Letting down her hair, she dried his feet, kissed them, and anointed them with the perfume. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man was the prophet I thought he was, he would have known what kind of woman this is who is falling all over him."

Jesus said to him, "Simon, I have something to tell you."

"Oh? Tell me."

"Two men were in debt to a banker. One owed five hundred silver pieces, the other fifty. Neither of them could pay up, and so the banker canceled both debts. Which of the two would be more grateful?"

Simon answered, "I suppose the one who was forgiven the most."

"That's right," said Jesus. Then turning to the woman, but speaking to Simon, he said, "Do you see this woman? I came to your home; you provided no water for my feet, but she rained tears on my feet and dried them with her hair. You gave me no greeting, but from the time I arrived she hasn't quit kissing my feet. You provided nothing for freshening up, but she has soothed my feet with perfume. Impressive, isn't it? She was forgiven many, many sins, and so she is very, very grateful. If the forgiveness is minimal, the gratitude is minimal."

Then he spoke to her: "I forgive your sins."


That set the dinner guests talking behind his back: "Who does he think he is, forgiving sins!"

He ignored them and said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

(Luke 7:36-50, The Message)

Questions

1. Who was Simon? What do we know about him from the story? What was his role that evening? What was his approach to Jesus?

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2. What do we know from the story about the woman who anointed Jesus

3. Describe in your own words what she actually did in her interaction with Jesus. Does the story tell us why she acted this way?



APPROX.
15 min.

Reflection:

➤ Think for a few minutes about 2 or 3 people you know who have no connection to a community of faith. They may be a family member, a neighbour, a colleague, or a friend.

➤ Pray for each of them quietly, asking God to use you to make them more aware of Him.

➤ Which of the following things, that we often do at church, might be strange to an un-churched person, and make them feel like an outsider. Place a check beside each one.

☐ Unsignalled standing, sitting, kneeling

☐ Singing songs they don't know

☐ Singing parts of the written liturgy (but not other parts).

☐ Having it suggested they leave their baby in the staffed nursery, and their child in Sunday School

☐ Having it suggested that they spend the service with their baby in the un-staffed nursery

☐ No explanation about who does what at Communion, or the Peace

☐ Having a plate passed to them that people have been putting money and envelopes on

➤ Are there other things we do on Sundays that would seem completely foreign to an un-churched person? Jot down any you think of.


- ➡ Do we, as seasoned church members, secretly expect outsiders to ‘just know this stuff’ or ‘pick it up as they keep coming’?
- ➡ Think of someone (or some group of people) that you see as ‘most unlikely’ to explore faith in your church? What makes you think of them this way?

Leader invites one or two people to share briefly something from their reflection

Video Content

Watch “Invited - Episode 3: Joy”

Episode 3: Joy, and all of the Invited video content, can be found at www.spiritofinvitation.com

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Concluding Reflection and Prayer

Leader: Tonight/today, we've explored the idea that God is not willing for anyone to lose out on knowing Him, and experiencing the transformation that brings. He wants everyone. We, however, often behave as though this isn't really true. Who are the ‘outsiders’ in your life that you've perhaps assumed are beyond God's invitation (and engagement)?

Let's take a few moments to offer up these thoughts, the movements of our hearts in quiet.

(short silence)

Leader: As we think about what we talked about, what has most engaged you about our discussions tonight/today? Where did you see God active? What is one thing that you can take away and pray about, or act on?

(short silence)

Leader: Let's take a moment and give thanks to the Lord for that insight.

(short silence)

Leader: Now, what has most disturbed you about our discussions tonight/today? Where did you see God active in the disturbance? What is the thing you can take away and pray about, or act on?

(short silence)

Leader: Even if it's made you uncomfortable, disturbed you, try and thank God for that disturbance anyway. Sometimes the discomfort is there to teach us something – to give us a gift.

(short silence)

Leader: Loving God, so audaciously generous and loving. Help us to truly grasp that you are continually inviting people, both insiders and outsiders, to yourself. May we go ever deeper in our own relationship with you. Kindle in us a deep desire for others who do not yet know you to also be drawn to you, the Living God.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Let's say the Grace together:

All: The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all forevermore. Amen.



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Session 4



*The session begins with a time of greeting – perhaps with refreshments.
When the group is ready, the leader proceeds with the opening prayers:*

Opening Prayers:

Leader: In prayer, in quiet, let's bring the concerns of our day before God for a few minutes before we start.

(Short silence)

Leader: Ask yourself: what was/is the most challenging thing I faced today? What's still on my mind? Where did I see the Lord working in those moments?

Think about that for a minute, and ask God to hold those concerns for you – relieve you of their weight for a short time.

(Medium silence)



*APPROX.
10 min
or as long as
needed.*

Leader: Now ask yourself: what was the easiest and happiest thing about today? Where did I see the Lord working in those moments?

Think about that for a minute or two and again, let's give thanks to God for those things.

(short silence)

Leader: And now, let's offer both our challenges and our joys to God to hold for a few hours while we seek his will for our time in this group.

(short silence)

All: Lord, your voice nudges us, prepares us, opens us to the possibility of your work in us. Strengthen us for the work of invitation. Help us to have the ears to hear and the eyes to see where you are working – where you are present in peoples' lives and then give us the courage to let nothing get in the way of that invitation. Bless this time for our use and your glory. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

 **Focus Question:**

What gets in the way of inviting?

Leader:

Tonight's/today's focus is specifically: *what gets in the way of passing along the invitation?*

In session two we explored the idea that *it is God who invites* people into a relationship with him. We read the story of Jesus' call of Philip and Nathanael. We discussed, that like Philip, we as the face and hands of Christ in the world, embody that spirit of invitation in who we are as a gathered community and how we extend it to all people.

Tonight/today, we're going to explore what the *challenges of inviting* look like and how we might begin to address them. Let's move to our scripture study to explore how that question is played out there.

Scripture Study:

Have someone in your group read aloud Acts 17:16-34



APPROX.
45 min.

Athens

The longer Paul waited in Athens for Silas and Timothy, the angrier he got—all those idols! The city was a junkyard of idols.

He discussed it with the Jews and other like-minded people at their meeting place. And every day he went out on the streets and talked with anyone who happened along. He got to know some of the Epicurean and Stoic intellectuals pretty well through these conversations. Some of them dismissed him with sarcasm: “What an airhead!” But others, listening to him go on about Jesus and the resurrection, were intrigued: “That’s a new slant on the gods. Tell us more.”

These people got together and asked him to make a public presentation over at the Areopagus, where things were a little quieter. They said, “This is a new one on us. We’ve never heard anything quite like it. Where did you come up with this anyway? Explain it so we can understand.” Downtown Athens was a great place for gossip. There were always people hanging around, natives and tourists alike, waiting for the latest tidbit on most anything.

So Paul took his stand in the open space at the Areopagus and laid it out for them. “It is plain to see that you Athenians take your religion seriously. When I arrived here the other day, I was fascinated with all the shrines I came across. And then I found one inscribed, to the god nobody knows. I’m here to introduce you to this God so you can worship intelligently, know who you’re dealing with.

“The God who made the world and everything in it, this Master of sky and land, doesn’t live in custom-made shrines or need the human race to run errands for him, as if he couldn’t take care of himself. He makes the creatures; the creatures don’t make him. Starting from scratch, he made the entire human race and made the

Some of them dismissed him with sarcasm: “What an airhead!” But others, listening to him go on about Jesus and the resurrection, were intrigued

earth hospitable, with plenty of time and space for living so we could seek after God, and not just grope around in the dark but actually find him. He doesn’t play hide-and-seek with us. He’s not remote; he’s near. We live and move in him, can’t get away from him! One of your poets said it well: ‘We’re the God-created.’ Well, if we are the God-created, it doesn’t make a lot of sense to think we could hire a sculptor to chisel a god out of stone for us, does it?

“God overlooks it as long as you don’t know any better—but that time is past. The unknown is now known, and he’s calling for a radical life-change. He has set a day when the entire human race will be judged and everything set right. And he has already appointed the judge, confirming him before everyone by raising him from the dead.”

At the phrase “raising him from the dead,” the listeners split: Some laughed at him and walked off making jokes; others said, “Let’s do this again. We want to hear more.” But that was it for the day, and Paul left. There were still others, it turned out, who were convinced then and there, and stuck with Paul—among them Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris.

Questions

1. What was Paul's reaction to the intellectually sophisticated city of Athens? Why?
2. Despite his own feelings, how did Paul connect with the Athenians?
3. Looking back through the story, what was the range of reactions to Paul's witness to Jesus from the citizens of Athens?
4. What was the result of his witness?

Reflection Going Deeper

Leader: Take a few minutes to think through the following quietly:

- What can Paul's example in Athens teach us about talking about our faith today?
- How should we treat people with different cultures and beliefs?
- Could you share the Gospel with someone in a culturally relevant way?
- Do you fear the same kinds of reaction were you to share your faith beliefs?

The leader then invites one or two people to share something from their reflection.

Rooting the Invitation Invitation in Our Lives:


APPROX.
45 min.

Have some members in the group read aloud the contemporary narratives below:

AMY

Amy worked with a lot of really great people: really great, nice, and not in a bland way, but really nice, kind, and ethical folks. They lived according to their own codes of ethics and seemed to be happy. She was also a nice person, living according to the Way of Jesus. She was very well aware that she was called as a Christian to share that faith. But she just couldn't work out how to introduce that conversation to people who seemed to do very well without Jesus.

YASSIN

He'd often thought about it – even wanted to do it, but Yassin just didn't feel quite brave enough to talk about his faith with his friends. For years he'd been living, while not exactly a secret Christian life, not exactly an openly Christian life either. He wished he could be more transparent with his friends and family but he feared their judgment.

EDMUND

Being a Christian was something Edmund had grown up with. His parents and grandparents had done the church thing forever. And he had grown up in church too and had loved youth group and Christian camp. But among his university friends, so few of them had any experience of that sort of thing. It was so hard to speak about faith to people whose life experience was so different from his.

HELEN

Helen wanted to invite her friends to come to church, she really did. She spent so much time with them. They shared experiences of having small children, attending school events and sports teams together. But those programmes were different. They had shiny facilities and were tightly organized and catered for the needs of the children. How could she invite her friends into the sometimes disorganized community of people gathered around Jesus? It was not what they were used to . . .

Questions:

Do any of the experiences of Yassin, Amy, Edmund or Helen resonate with you?

Why or why not?

Further Thoughts

Leader:

It seems that there may be several barriers to inviting people we know to explore Christian faith:

- *Perhaps we feel that our own faith/witness is insufficient: we feel inadequate to the task of communicating our faith. Will we have all the right answers to their questions?*
- *Perhaps we feel reluctant to invite people to a church community that isn't "perfect" with "perfect" godly people. We certainly are a mixed bag!*
- *Perhaps we've temporarily forgotten that if God is already inviting people to know Him, God will make up for our inadequacies . . .*
- *Perhaps we fear rejection and awkwardness in our relationships.*
- *Perhaps we think that offering an invitation isn't our job – that it's someone else's job!*

All of these things could be perceived as barriers. And it's true that speaking to others about our faith can seem a somewhat difficult task.

Let's examine them in turn:

It's true that the ability to invite people to Christ rests on a couple of assumptions: first, that we ourselves believe what we are called to share; that we ourselves understand and have appropriated our own faith; that we ourselves have experienced the power of the presence of the living Christ in our own lives and know, like the disciple Philip that we need to pass our experience of Jesus on to others. But it's not as neat and tidy as all that. In fact, the life of faith is characterized more by messiness than neatness.

Take *St. Paul*. Now, not everyone will have as dramatic a story as his, but certain parts of that story still have resonance for those of us whose paths have been a little tamer.

If you remember the old, old story, at first he appears in the scriptures as Saul (his name in Hebrew), who breathed "*threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord*" in the Book of Acts. Saul of Tarsus was a Zealot and a dangerous man to the Christians. He had set his face against the Jesus movement and was dedicated to eradicating it and the people who

followed The Way of Christ. But then he had an experience that fundamentally reoriented him toward Jesus.

Despite his new life and identity, however, Paul (his name in Greek) never quite got over his previous life. He speaks movingly of his persecuting days in the letter to the Galatian church, saying, *“I’m sure that you’ve heard the story of my earlier life when I lived in the Jewish way. In those days I went all out in persecuting God’s church. I was systematically destroying it. I was so enthusiastic about the traditions of my ancestors that I advanced head and shoulders above my peers in my career. Even then God had designs on me. Why, when I was still in my mother’s womb he chose and called me out of sheer generosity! Now he has intervened and revealed his Son to me so that I might joyfully tell non-Jews about him.”*

A couple of things are really evident in Paul’s story. First, God works through ordinary, flawed people like him - someone who had cruelly persecuted Christians. Second, that God, in his love and mercy, can redeem anyone to proclaim the Gospel. God’s love is so deep and wide and strong that even one so violently opposed to Christ could be turned and used as an instrument of his glory. How much more can he use us ordinary people?

And Paul was keenly aware of God’s gifts when he speaks movingly in the letter to the Ephesian

church,

“This is my life work: helping people understand and respond to this Message. It came as a sheer gift to me, a real surprise, God handling all the details. When it came to presenting the Message to people who had no background in God’s way, I was the least qualified of any of the available Christians. God saw to it that I was equipped, but you can be sure that it had nothing to do with my natural abilities.”

The point here is that God loves us so much that he will not only go to extraordinary lengths to show us that and seek us in relationship, but that it is the desire of God’s heart that we then seek to offer others that gift of an encounter with the living Christ. God works through all of his children to gather us. The functional, the dysfunctional, the reasonable, the unreasonable, etc.... The point is, if Paul can get past his insecurities and his history, so can we.

But perhaps our worries extend to the kind of community we’re inviting

people to? That’s understandable. There isn’t a church in the world full of “perfect” people. Like St. Paul, we all come with our talents, our prejudices, our character quirks, our generosity of spirit, our meanness, in short, with all the characteristics that make us fully human.

But that doesn’t get us off the hook. The truth is, when we begin to think about the

**First, God works
through ordinary,
flawed people like him**

**Second, God can
redeem anyone to
proclaim the Gospel**

idea of invitation from the point of view of those being invited, it may be that we have to change some things about our community in order to open it up to all. This leads us into a process of discernment in which we will have to ask some difficult questions such as: are we privileging our own comfort at the expense of fulfilling our commission to invite others into the Jesus community?

Churches aren't perfect, but they are places where we gather to praise and worship God: a place where God is present blessing us and encouraging us; a place where the Spirit takes all that we have to offer – the good and the bad and the ugly and transforms it through the Good News of Jesus Christ. And that's what makes a community of faith a gift worth offering.

Reflection

What about us?

Leader: Take a few minutes to read through the following questions and to think about how you might respond:


1. Have we made inviting people more difficult than it really is?
Can it not be as simple as extending an invitation: "Come and see...?"
2. Should someone decline an invitation, what's the worst that can happen? It's inevitable that some will decline it – as some walked away from St. Paul. Then we are free to offer it to someone else. As long as we've offered out of an authentic faith and in a respectful way, it's never negative. And chances are, there will be a few, who although responding luke-warmly to the initial invitation, may well respond positively down the road. Remember, coming to faith is a process for the vast majority of people.
3. What are some things we need to prayerfully consider changing about our communities in order to invite others with confidence?

Leader initiates discussion around the questions.

Video Content

Watch “Invited - Episode 4: Us”

Episode 4: Us, and all of the Invited video content, can be found at www.spiritofinvitation.com

 DON'T FORGET
TO CHECK OUT THE
LINER NOTES THAT GO
WITH THIS EPISODE.
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ONLINE.

Concluding Reflection and Prayer

Leader: Tonight/today, we've explored the idea that even though there are challenges to offering an invitation to a relationship with Jesus Christ, they are not insurmountable. Through Christ in the power of the Spirit, having understood the people whom we seek to invite and with realistic expectations, we can issue that invitation with confidence remembering that it is God who first invites, and God who equips us to become witnessing communities too.

Let's take a few moments to offer up these thoughts, the movements of our hearts in quiet.

(short silence)

Leader: As we think about what we talked about, what has most engaged you about our discussions tonight/today? Where did you see God active? What is one thing that you can take away and pray about, or act on?

(short silence)

Leader: Let's take a moment and give thanks to the Lord for that insight.

(short silence)

Leader: Now, what has most disturbed you about our discussions tonight/today? Where did you see God active in the disturbance? What is the thing you can take away and pray about, or act on?

(short silence)

Leader: Even if it's made you uncomfortable, disturbed you, try and thank God for that disturbance anyway. Sometimes the discomfort is there to teach us something – to give us a gift.

(short silence)

Leader: Loving God,

You are continually calling to people everywhere in the ordinariness of their daily lives: while at work in your world, in their families, and in the midst of the many things they do each day. You are there first, loving and offering the depth and warmth of a relationship with you.

We are thankful for this and all your gifts.
Amen.

And now let's say the Grace together:

All: **The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all forevermore. Amen.**



invited

Session 5



*The session begins with a time of greeting – perhaps with refreshments.
When the group is ready, the leader proceeds with the opening prayers:*

Opening Prayers:

Leader: In prayer, in quiet, let's bring the concerns of our day
before God for a few minutes before we start.

(Short silence)

Leader: Ask yourself: what was/is the most challenging thing I
faced today? What's still on my mind? Where did I see
the Lord working in those moments?

Think about that for a minute, and ask God to hold those
concerns for you – relieve you of their weight for a short
time.

(Medium silence)



*APPROX.
10 min
or as long as
needed.*

Leader: Now ask yourself: what was the easiest and happiest thing about today? Where did I see the Lord working in those moments?

Think about that for a minute or two and again, let's give thanks to God for those things.

(short silence)

Leader: And now, let's offer both our challenges and our joys to God to hold for a few hours while we seek his will for our time in this group.

(short silence)

All: **Lord, when we stop to think about what you mean to us, how you have perhaps changed or been the mainstay in our lives, the depth of our thanks is profound. It also becomes the reason that we might share this faith in relationship with others. Bless this time to our use and to your glory. Amen.**



APPROX.
30 - 45 min.

Focus Question:

What Does Inviting Look Like?

Leader reads the following:

Sharing God's invitation for people to come to know Him and know His love for them is not done by following some recipe. We aren't selling people something. We don't need to cajole, threaten, trick or shame

someone into something. Rather it involves sharing what we've found in the context of real relationships. It involves listening and respecting a fellow human being. But it also involves being aware of opportunities for sharing your story of faith and why it matters to you. And that takes a certain amount of vulnerability, and courage.

In this session we'll be exploring what sharing God's invitation can look like in our everyday lives.

Have several people in the group take turns reading aloud the following paragraphs:

Maxine had always loved music, and at university she'd gone a couple of times with a friend to an evening gathering of students at a church next to the university. She really liked the music they were singing there! Now older, and living in another city, her husband's aunt invited her to come to a new service starting at her church. They sang some of the same songs she'd heard back at the campus church.

Cindy had just landed a great job. Her dream job, in fact. So why, six months in, did she feel like there had to be something more? A friend sent her a link to a blog she'd been following. It got them talking about spiritual issues. Could people really be lucid, thinking people and believe this stuff? The blog talked about a course for exploring Christianity. It seemed like a good way to get her questions answered.

Andy's son had told him about a weekly discussion group he'd been a part of at a local pub. The group met for eight Wednesday evenings, to talk about what faith looks like today. He told his dad he thought he'd really enjoy it too, if he could find the same sort of thing in his city. They started to look on-line.

Nick had been going to an evening course at the church but now he thought he'd try out Sunday. But when he got there he just walked up and down the sidewalk. What if he got in there and didn't know what to do? Down the sidewalk though came Marjie, who was also in the evening course. She said hi and asked if she could sit with him. She said not to worry, she could show him the ropes of the service.

 MORE STORIES
ON THE NEXT PAGE

Chad and Martha's 8 year old daughter Molly had been asking some questions about God. They thought they'd see if taking her to church could help answer her questions. They went on-line. After checking out several churches they found one that allowed them different options as parents, and seemed to genuinely welcome kids. They also had facilities for Zack, who was just 6 months old; a change table, a space in the church where she could feed him comfortably, and a quiet play area so they could keep him with them.

Sarah and Meagan were out for a coffee after a yoga class. Meagan told Sarah she'd got a call back from her breast screening appointment. She was worried. Sarah told her she was sure lots of women get call-backs, but that she'd definitely add it to her prayer list. She also offered to go with her to the call-back appointment. Meagan told her that would be great to have someone there with her.

Dan was worried about his son Henry. He knew he was spending a lot of time playing video games after school, but with a long commute Dan wasn't sure how to change that. His neighbour told him about an after-school program that a church in the neighbourhood was running. When he went over to check it out he recognized another neighbour, whose son went to the same school as Henry. She answered all his questions about the program, and told him about their youth group too.

Zach was curious about the fact his colleague in IT, Sanjay, went to church. He wondered how to bring up the topic without offending him. Then one day during a coffee break Sanjay mentioned there was a family movie night happening at his church, and wondered if Zach and his family would like to come with them. Finally, the perfect opportunity to get the conversation started!

Ellen invited the new person at work, Julie, to have lunch with her. She was new in town and didn't know too many people. Ellen told her about the discussion group from her church that meets weekly at her apartment. They were having a Bar BQ this weekend, and a couple of the group's regulars had invited friends. Would she like to come along?

Reflection

Have someone read the following reflection while others read along:

Everyone who comes to faith, came because someone passed along God's invitation. Sometimes it was a parent, uncle or grandmother. Sometimes a Sunday School teacher or youth leader. Sometimes it was a friend, neighbour, or colleague. Sometimes it was a the preacher who passed along the invitation.

There is no one way to share God's invitation with people. It depends entirely on their situation. The great thing is that there are so many ways, both as individual Christians, and as communities of faith, to invite people to explore faith. A conversation over coffee, a small group meeting in a home, a course introducing Christian teaching and practices, a discussion in a pub, a social event in a church hall, an after-school program or summer kids' camp, a community event in the neighbourhood, a family supper table. There are literally hundreds of settings in which God's invitation to know Him can be shared. It can even happen in a Sunday morning church service.

There are literally hundreds of settings in which God's invitation to know Him can be shared.

It can even happen in a Sunday morning church service.

Group Discussion:

Who passed along the invitation to you?
Was there one person, or many?



APPROX.
45 min.

Scripture Study:

An Invitation Passed Along

Today we look at two different situations in which the invitation to explore faith is passed along.

Have someone read aloud John 1:35 - 42

The next day John was back at his post with two disciples, who were watching. He looked up, saw Jesus walking nearby, and said, "Here he is, God's Passover Lamb."

The two disciples heard him and went after Jesus. Jesus looked over his shoulder and said to them, "What are you after?"

They said, "Rabbi" (which means "Teacher"), "where are you staying?"

He replied, "Come along and see for yourself."

They came, saw where he was living, and ended up staying with him for the day. It was late afternoon when this happened.

Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard John's witness and followed Jesus. The first thing he did after finding where Jesus lived was find his own brother, Simon, telling him, "We've found the Messiah" (that is, "Christ"). He immediately led him to Jesus.

Jesus took one look up and said, "You're John's son, Simon? From now on your name is Cephas" (or Peter, which means "Rock").

(John 1:35 - 42, The Message)

1. How did the calling of Andrew and Simon (Peter) happen? Have someone in the group re-tell the story in their own words.
2. Was there any sense of coercion, threat or trickery involved? What feelings are being expressed?

Have someone read aloud Acts 8:26-40

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

“How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

In his humiliation he was deprived of
justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth.”

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet.

The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

(Acts 8:26-40, *The Message*)

Questions

1. Why was Philip at that specific place?
2. Before Philip spoke, what did he do?



PLEASE NOTE
THAT ADDITIONAL
REFERENCE NOTES
MAY BE FOUND IN
THE APPENDICES

3. When he spoke what question was he addressing?
4. What knowledge did Philip need in order to address the question asked?



APPROX.
15 min.


Reflection **Going Deeper**

- Imagine a scenario in which someone asked you this question, while you were having coffee with them. “So you really believe this stuff? Why?” Now take a few minutes to think about how you’d respond. (Don’t worry too much about having ‘the right’ answer ... just speak from the heart.)
- Share briefly with you group the scenario you imagined.
- Who are the children, the teens, the neighbours, the colleagues, the friends, the family members, who might just be waiting to have an invitation to:
 - *A discussion over coffee*
 - *A discussion group exploring Christianity*
 - *A summer kids day-camp or youth program*
 - *An after-school club*
 - *A Christmas Carol service*
 - *An evening of carol singing through the neighbourhood*
 - *A parenting course*
 - *A ‘blue Christmas’ service for someone who has lost a loved one*
 - *A breakfast book club*

Video Content

Watch “Invited - Episode 5: One”

Episode 5: One, and all of the Invited video content, can be found at www.spiritofinvitation.com

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LINER NOTES THAT GO
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ONLINE.

Concluding Reflection and Prayer

Leader: Tonight/today, we've explored the idea that inviting can take many forms. Sharing your faith can involve chatting over coffee, inviting a friend to a discussion group at a local pub, or to a Welcome Sunday at your church. An invitation to faith can start with the simple words, *“I'll be praying for you about that ...”* or *“Have you ever thought this situation you're facing might be a God-thing?”*

Inviting people to explore faith should never be a recipe. People should never be made to feel like someone's project. It's always genuine, non-coercive and specific to where each person is at.

Let's take a few moments to offer up these thoughts, the movements of our hearts in quiet.

(short silence)

Leader: As we think about what we talked about, what has most engaged you about our discussions tonight/today? Where did you see God active? What is one thing that you can take away and pray about, or act on?

(short silence)

Leader: Let's take a moment and give thanks to the Lord for that insight.

(short silence)

Leader: Now, what has most disturbed you about our discussions tonight/today? Where did you see God active in the disturbance? What is the thing you can take away and pray about, or act on?

(short silence)

Leader: Even if it's made you uncomfortable, disturbed you, try and thank God for that disturbance anyway. Sometimes the discomfort is there to teach us something – to give us a gift.

(short silence)

Leader: Lord, stir up in us a deep desire to be used as bearers of your invitation. Open our eyes to the opportunities around us everyday to share it with people in our lives. May we do so as you do; out of the deepest love, and hope for healing, wholeness and fullness of life. We ask this in Christ's name. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Let's say the Grace together:

All: **The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all forevermore. Amen.**



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Session 6



*The session begins with a time of greeting – perhaps with refreshments.
When the group is ready, the leader proceeds with the opening prayers:*

Opening Prayers:

Leader: In prayer, in quiet, let's bring the concerns of our day before God for a few minutes before we start.

(Short silence)

Leader: Ask yourself: what was/is the most challenging thing I faced today? What's still on my mind? Where did I see the Lord working in those moments?

Think about that for a minute, and ask God to hold those concerns for you – relieve you of their weight for a short time.

(Medium silence)



*APPROX.
10 min
or as long as
needed.*

Leader: Now ask yourself: what was the easiest and happiest thing about today? Where did I see the Lord working in those moments?

Think about that for a minute or two and again, let's give thanks to God for those things.

(short silence)

Leader: And now, let's offer both our challenges and our joys to God to hold for a few hours while we seek his will for our time in this group.

(short silence)

All: **God of Grace and Love, thank you for opening our eyes to the places where you're at work. Thank you for showing up in unexpected quarters, working through unexpected people and accomplishing unexpected things. Father, we pray tonight/today for a spirit of honesty: honesty about the insecurities or resistance and perhaps fears that keep us from sharing your love with others.**

We pray that you would breathe your Spirit of peace on us as we bring our concerns to each other. We pray that you would give us confidence in sharing the gift of your love. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Focus Question:

What are the Risks and Rewards of Invitation?



APPROX.
45 min.

Leader reads:

Tonight's/today's focus is specifically dealing with the question: What might be the risks and rewards of invitation?

In our previous sessions we have explored why we invite, whose invitation it is, and who might be invited. We also thought about what that inviting might look like, and what might get in the way of issuing that invitation. Now we arrive at an assessment of the risks and the rewards involved.

Let's move to our scripture study to explore two stories that illustrate how God's Spirit works through us to reach others:

Scripture Study:

Have one or two members of the group read Acts 10:1-36.

Peter's Vision

There was a man named Cornelius who lived in Caesarea, captain of the Italian Guard stationed there. He was a thoroughly good man. He had led everyone in his house to live worshipfully before God, was always helping people in need, and had the habit of prayer. One day about three o'clock in the afternoon he had a vision. An angel of God, as real as his next-door neighbor, came in and said, "Cornelius."

Cornelius stared hard, wondering if he was seeing things. Then he said, "What do you want, sir?"

The angel said, "Your prayers and neighborly acts have brought you to God's attention. Here's what you are to do. Send men to Joppa to get Simon, the one everyone calls Peter. He is staying with Simon the Tanner, whose house is down by the sea."

As soon as the angel was gone, Cornelius called two servants and one particularly devout soldier from the guard. He went over with them in great detail everything that had just happened, and then sent them off to Joppa.

The next day as the three travelers were approaching the town, Peter went out on the balcony to pray. It was about noon. Peter got hungry and started thinking about lunch. While lunch was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the skies open up. Something that looked like a huge blanket lowered by ropes at its four corners settled on the ground. Every kind of animal and reptile and bird you could think of was on it. Then a voice came: "Go to it, Peter—kill and eat."

Peter said, "Oh, no, Lord. I've never so much as tasted food that was not kosher."

The voice came a second time: “If God says it’s okay, it’s okay.”

This happened three times, and then the blanket was pulled back up into the skies.

As Peter, puzzled, sat there trying to figure out what it all meant, the men sent by Cornelius showed up at Simon’s front door. They called in, asking if there was a Simon, also called Peter, staying there. Peter, lost in thought, didn’t hear them, so the Spirit whispered to him, “Three men are knocking at the door looking for you. Get down there and go with them. Don’t ask any questions. I sent them to get you.”

Peter went down and said to the men, “I think I’m the man you’re looking for. What’s up?”

They said, “Captain Cornelius, a God-fearing man well-known for his fair play—ask any Jew in this part of the country—was commanded by a holy angel to get you and bring you to his house so he could hear what you had to say.” Peter invited them in and made them feel at home.

The next morning he got up and went with them. Some of his friends from Joppa went along. A day later they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had his relatives and close friends waiting with him. The minute Peter came through the door, Cornelius was up on his feet greeting him—and then down on his face worshiping him! Peter pulled him up and said, “None of that—I’m a man and only a man, no different from you.”

Talking things over, they went on into the house, where Cornelius introduced Peter to everyone who had come. Peter addressed them, “You know, I’m sure that this is highly irregular. Jews just don’t do this—visit and relax with people of another race. But God has just shown me that no race is better than any other. So the minute I was sent for, I came, no questions asked. But now I’d like to know why you sent for me.”

Cornelius said, “Four days ago at about this time, mid-afternoon, I was home praying.

**You know,
I’m sure that this is
highly irregular. Jews
just don’t do this—visit
and relax with people
of another race.
But God has just shown
me that no race is
better than any other.**

Suddenly there was a man right in front of me, flooding the room with light. He said, ‘Cornelius, your daily prayers and neighborly acts have brought you to God’s attention. I want you to send to Joppa to get Simon, the one they call Peter. He’s staying with Simon the Tanner down by the sea.’

“So I did it—I sent for you. And you’ve been good enough to come. And now we’re all here in God’s presence, ready to listen to whatever the Master put in your heart to tell us.”

Peter fairly exploded with his good news: “It’s God’s own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you’re from—if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open. The Message he sent to the children of Israel—that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again—well, he’s doing it everywhere, among everyone.

(Acts 10:1–36, *The Message*)

Leader then reads:

This overturning of the kosher laws was momentous for Peter. It's hard for us to wrap our heads around the religious revolution this was, but it was huge. It was a significant sacrifice for the Jewish Christians made in love for the spreading of the Gospel. In this story, we are witnessing Peter's "Eureka!" moment when he put it all together and realized where God is leading him.

God is way out in front of us – bringing people together, bringing nations together, breaking down barriers of custom, tradition, race and creed so that we might all understand the fullness of the love and peace that he offers.

But we in turn, have laid upon us the obligation to listen for God's good word, and to respond to it. When both God's will and our response are present, the Spirit leads us into places and relationships we never thought possible.

Questions:

1. What were the potential risks for Peter and Cornelius of following God's will?
2. Similarly, what were the joys and rewards?
3. Are there any ways in which you feel God is prompting you to change in order to be invitational?

Have another member of the group read the second passage, Acts 16:1-15

A Dream Gave Paul His Map

Paul came first to Derbe, then Lystra. He found a disciple there by the name of Timothy, son of a devout Jewish mother and Greek father. Friends in Lystra and Iconium all said what a fine young man he was. Paul wanted to recruit him for their mission, but first took him aside and circumcised him so he wouldn't offend the Jews who lived in those parts. They all knew that his father was Greek.

**That night Paul
had a dream:
A Macedonian
stood on the far
shore and called
across the sea,
“Come over to
Macedonia and
help us!”**

As they traveled from town to town, they presented the simple guidelines the Jerusalem apostles and leaders had come up with. That turned out to be most helpful. Day after day the congregations became stronger in faith and larger in size.

They went to Phrygia, and then on through the region of Galatia. Their plan was to turn west into Asia province, but the Holy Spirit blocked that route. So they went to Mysia and tried to go north to Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus wouldn't let them go there either. Proceeding on through Mysia, they went down to the seaport Troas.

That night Paul had a dream: A Macedonian stood on the far shore and called across the sea, “Come over to Macedonia and help us!” The dream gave Paul his map. We went to work at once getting things ready to cross over to Macedonia. All the pieces had come together. We knew now for sure that God had called us to preach the good news to the Europeans.

Putting out from the harbor at Troas, we made a straight run for Samothrace. The next day we tied up at New City and walked from there to Philippi, the main city in that part of Macedonia and, even more importantly, a Roman colony. We lingered there several days.


On the Sabbath, we left the city and went down along the river where we had heard there was to be a prayer meeting. We took our place with the women who had gathered there and talked with them. One woman, Lydia, was from Thyatira and a dealer in expensive textiles, known to be a God-fearing woman. As she listened with intensity to what was being said, the Master gave her a trusting heart — and she believed!

After she was baptized, along with everyone in her household, she said in a surge of hospitality, “If you're confident that I'm in this with you and believe in the Master truly, come home with me and be my guests.” We hesitated, but she wouldn't take no for an answer.

(Acts 16:1-15, *The Message*)

Questions

1. Looking back through the passage, identify where Paul and Silas' plans changed.
2. How/why did they change?
3. What happens in Lydia's life as a result of this hearing of the Gospel?

 PLEASE NOTE
THAT ADDITIONAL
REFERENCE NOTES
MAY BE FOUND IN THE
APPENDICES (page
75)

Reflection Going Deeper

Leader: Take a few minutes to think through the following quietly:

- ➡ What are the most important points in this story?
- ➡ Are there any principles of invitation that we can take away from it?

The Leader then invites one or two people to share something from their reflection.



APPROX.
45 min.



Rooting the Invitation Invitation in Our Lives

Have different group members read the contemporary narratives aloud

PAUL

Paul's parents had drifted in and out of church from time to time in his upbringing. Most often though especially when in his teens, they'd opted for the "church of the holy comforter" on Sunday mornings. He hadn't had a bad experience, just a lukewarm one and he wasn't entirely sure what he believed now. But now, living in the city on his own, he missed the memory of the warmth of the community of church and really wished that someone would reach out to him – just invite him sometime. He was lonely.

CHRIS

Chris had always been what you might call an atheist-leaning-agnostic with no particular need for God. That is, until his partner died. Dealing with that kind of loss suddenly changed things. Coping with the loneliness, the seeming randomness of his partner's death was hard. Chris began to wonder again about Jesus and whether he might find some peace around his grief in the Jesus community...

MAG

Lately Mag was finding life hard. Between health concerns and resulting unemployment, much of the joy had gone out of her life. What she craved was a place to go and get out of herself; to do something for someone else. She needed to belong. But she wasn't sure that she believed in God – not just yet...

SARAH

Sarah had grown up in a faith culture other than Christianity. She'd stumbled across Jesus at university through a campus mission and had committed her life to Christ at that time. But even though her belief was the joy and foundation of her life, it was also difficult to share it in her context. She just needed some help expressing things in ways that made sense to non-Christians...

Questions:

1. Do any of these experiences resonate with you?
2. Why or why not?

Further thoughts:

Leader reads:

The reality is, invitation from a believer to a non-believer is by faith ultimately. We all acknowledge that we will never have enough faith to have full and utter confidence in either God or our gathered communities. We will always need the Lord to work through us. We will always have to rely on our faith in God. Our mustard seeds of faith will have to be enough and we pray that God will supply all the rest.

Here's a list of some identified risks and rewards of sharing our faith:

RISKS:

- *Fear of relationships being strained or even broken*
- *Fear of revealing ourselves as Christians*
- *Fear of vulnerability in a secular world in which we might be seen as “religious” or intellectually suspect/feeble minded/prejudiced/superstitious*
- *Discomfort with setting ourselves apart*
- *Fearing a change in others, or in ourselves as a result of this revelation*
- *Discomfort with stepping outside our own comfort zones*
- *Breaking a social taboo that church/religion is not talked about*

REWARDS:

- *Sharing the gift of faith and Christian community; things that have enriched us*
- *Renewal of, or creation of new relationships on deeper levels*
- *A strengthening of our own faith and confidence in our identity as Christians*
- *A sense of helping to build the people of God; people who honour Him with their lives*
- *A sense of fulfilling the baptismal promise “to proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ.”*
- *A sense of bravery and risk-taking*
- *And perhaps best of all the joy of seeing someone's faith grow!*

When considering these things, it's important that this be an honest assessment of the risks attached to making this invitation into a relationship with Christ.

So take a few minutes to quietly consider the following:

➤ Do those lists of risks and rewards resonate with you?

➤ What's missing from the list?

➤ What might you take away from this list?

Leader:

You've probably noticed by now that every risk in this list mirrors a reward and vice versa. The net result is usually that the risk equals the reward and to be honest, the reward really outweighs the risk in the end.

**Sharing our
faith is a risk.**

**But it's a
specific kind
of risk:
a social risk.**

There's no doubt however, that sharing our faith is a risk. But it's a specific kind of risk: a social risk. Over and over again as we read in the accounts of the missionary activity of the apostles, we see how they, for Christ's sake, risked rejection, indifference, lukewarm attitudes, danger, imprisonment and death for the sake of their faith in Jesus Christ. By the grace of God, we do not face imprisonment and death for sharing our faith as other Christians increasingly do in our world. But we can face the other reactions.

However, we also read stories of radical forgiveness and invitations given and received and generosity, and love, and self-offering.

From the stories of Jesus' healings signaling the coming of the kingdom, to the sending of the 72 out to bring the kingdom to the people, to one on one encounters of loving relationship such as the encounter of Philip

and Ethiopian Eunuch to Paul and Silas' feats of 'derring-do' in the Book of Acts, we are aware of the manifold ways that an invitation to be one with God takes.

And as Christians, we believe that the same God that has come to us in Christ Jesus, to show us what God's love looks and feels like, is also the same God that bids us share that love with others.

God first does the inviting – invites us into a loving relationship and then we literally pass it on. But even in the passing on, God works through us as a community of believers. It's not something we do on, or of our own. We give because it has been given to us. We offer because it has been offered to us. Christianity is the only world religion that has this imperative at its heart. Go and offer the love of God to everyone you meet: make disciples of all nations.

But Jesus also doesn't soft-pedal the risks of doing so.

What are we to do with this? We who are so socially risk averse? We who have been conditioned not to share faith lest it

But Jesus also doesn't soft-pedal the risks of doing so.

What are we to do with this? We who are so socially risk averse?

offends, or oppresses? We who are bravely soft-hearted in this often hard world?

How are we to make an account of the faith that is in us without causing offence?


The truth is, it may involve some of the risks we've discussed.

But here's the thing: it's still not up to us. We are joining in the work of the Spirit of God. It carries along all that we bring to bring to fruition all of God's work. And we do so as a community.

Video Content

Watch “Invited - Episode 6: Go”

Episode 6: Go, and all of the Invited video content, can be found at www.spiritofinvitation.com

 **DON'T FORGET**
TO CHECK OUT THE
LINER NOTES THAT GO
WITH THIS EPISODE.
YOU'LL FIND THEM
ONLINE.

Concluding Reflection and Prayer

Leader: And so we end as we began: by acknowledging that the Spirit of God is our guide, our stay and our power. Even when we – as ordinary people – just so many fishers of people, labourers in the vineyard – offer the love of God – it is God who works through us.

It helps so much to understand this. St. Paul said in Romans 1:16, “It’s news I’m most proud to proclaim, this extraordinary Message of God’s powerful plan to rescue everyone who trusts him, starting with Jews and then right on to everyone else!”

Let’s take a few moments to offer up these thoughts, the movements of our hearts in quiet.

(short silence)

Leader: As we think about what we talked about, what has most engaged you about our discussions tonight/today? Where did you see God active? What is one thing that you can take away and pray about, or act on?

(short silence)

Leader: Let’s take a moment and give thanks to the Lord for that insight.

(short silence)

Leader: Now, what has most disturbed you about our discussions tonight/today? Where did you see God active in the disturbance? What is the thing you can take away and pray about, or act on?

(short silence)

Leader: Even if it’s made you uncomfortable, disturbed you, try and thank God for that disturbance anyway. Sometimes the discomfort is there to teach us something – to give us a gift.

(short silence)

Leader: Father, we thank you that you are always inviting people and calling them into relationship with yourself. Help us to be ready to pass along your invitation in whatever opportunities you give us: to invite them into a gathered community of all your children trying hard to work out what your will is both for us and for the people we love and serve. Guide us, give us courage and confidence. May we feel your love for us Lord – for your grace and truth are our life. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

And now we say the Grace together:

All: **The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all forevermore. Amen.**



Appendices

▶ **A summary of the Introduction:**

Core assumptions of this study program, Invited:

- *Meant to inspire and equip Christians to share their faith*
- *We offer a love that we ourselves have been given and have experienced*
- *Is focused on the community of faith*
- *Is grounded in authentic relationship*
- *Invitation is an attitude of the heart and mind*
- *Invitation is grounded in the Christian story*
- *Is a resource based on an adult learning model that includes discussion*

The six sessions:

1. Why invite?
2. Whose invitation is it anyway?
3. So who is invited?
4. What gets in the way of us inviting?
5. What does inviting look like today?
6. What are the risks & rewards of inviting?

What are we inviting people to?

- To learn and join the way of Jesus Christ
- A generous, loving people, committed to the good news of Jesus Christ that transforms lives

Session 2

Leader's reference notes

- if the following points aren't raised in the group discussion please feel free to share these.

From the Scripture Study Questions starting on page 26::

1. Who does the inviting in this story?

In the first instance, God, in Christ with the power of the Holy Spirit. In the second, Philip, the one who has had an experience of a relationship with Jesus and who wanted to pass on that experience.

2. How would you describe the way that Jesus and Philip invite?

We can describe their invitations as propositional: come and see: follow me. Relaxed: Jesus' embodiment of the Gospel is winsome, attractive, he piqued their interest. He did not immediately teach them in an academic way, he demonstrated, enfleshed the Gospel in himself. He left in them in no doubt as to who he was – "You are the Son of God!" Nathanael says. Philip too affirms that he is the fulfillment of all the prophecies.

3. What does Jesus invite Philip and then Nathanael to do?

What does Philip invite Nathanael to do?

They both ask him to follow Jesus in the company of others: to see – to explore together, to learn, to witness together, to experience, to hear his message.

4. Who are the disciples?

Ordinary people: they were already seekers after truth – they were John's disciples first, but they were looking for one greater than John – the one to whom John pointed: the ultimate truth. They were fishermen. They were skeptics and perhaps the prejudiced (Can anything good come from Nazareth?) but Jesus welcomes their honesty (a man in whom there is no deceit); and he welcomes their ordinariness and gathers them round him in a learning and worshipping community.

➤ Session 3

Leader's reference notes

- if the following points aren't raised in the group discussion please feel free to share these.

From the Scripture Study Questions starting on page 37:

- 1. Who was Simon? What do we know about him from the story? What was his role that evening? What was his approach to Jesus?**

Simon, as a Pharisee, was in some ways was the ultimate 'religious insider', the ultimate church-goer, since the Pharisees believed in a strict adherence to the religious laws and customs. He was someone who knew the religious culture and how to operate within it. He was in a position of power as the host of the dinner party. He was a watcher and critiquer of Jesus' discernment, judgment, and deportment.

- 2. Describe in your own words what she actually did in her interaction with Jesus. Does the story tell us why she acted this way?**

The woman, with her unsavory past and her demonstrative behaviour, was the ultimate 'outsider'. As an intruder to the dinner party, and having her past already known, she was coming from a place of vulnerability. She was clearly touched emotionally and spiritually by Jesus, and offered him audacious generosity and devotion.

This story turns out to be a lesson for Simon about the transformation that forgiveness can bring. The woman had learned of God's lavish forgiveness of her, and as a result she was filled with a lavish love, expressed through her anointing of Jesus. This lesson itself shows that Jesus was also interested in bringing transformation into Simon's life. Forgiveness is the great equalizer. Once people fully grasp their own need for it, and the lavish way God offers it, they can't help but be thankful.

Isn't it interesting though that this story tells of transformation of someone previously an 'outsider', and that transformation is used as a lesson for an 'insider'. In short, God invites everyone.

➤ Session 4

Leader's reference notes

- if the following points aren't raised in the group discussion please feel free to share these.

From the Scripture Study Questions starting on page 44:

1. What was Paul's reaction to the intellectually sophisticated city of Athens? Why?

Frustration, anger. He felt that for a people who obviously took religion seriously, they had not chosen serious religion. They had missed God almost entirely – except for that blind groping toward the altar of an unknown God.

2. Despite his own feelings, how did Paul connect with the Athenians?

By embracing what God was already doing in their culture. A space had been prepared for Paul to speak into with the establishment of the altar to an unknown God. Paul examined his context and spoke into the Athenian's own culture, using their language and their customs to explain Christ and make an invitation into a relationship with God.

3. Looking back through the story, what was the range of reactions to Paul's witness to Jesus from the citizens of Athens?

Sarcasm, dismissal, an underestimation of his intelligence, interest, amazement, a fascination with anything new, derision, incredulity, intrigue, acceptance and conversion.

4. What was the result of his witness?

Many drifted away, but a named and significant few believed then and there. All it takes is a few...

▶ Session 5

Leader's reference notes

- if the following points aren't raised in the group discussion please feel free to share these.

From the Scripture Study Questions starting on page 57:

The God we believe in and follow as Christians is the Triune God, who dwells in the deepest form of relationship. Perfect unity between and in particular members. God reaches out from this deep communion to draw others in to Himself, as the very source of love. He reaches out within relationship, as a loving parent, and He loves us with an undying love. This same reaching out, out of authentic deep relationship is what invitation is all about. We reach out to family, friends, even strangers sometimes In everyday settings and out of natural conversations.

This is the calling of the church: to first hear the gospel and then to share it. We do this by listening and watching for the needs, the questions, the points of contact; both as individuals and as communities of faith.

One of the best definitions for sharing the good news of God remains 'one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread'.

Session 6

Leader's reference notes

- if the following points aren't raised in the group discussion please feel free to share these

From the Scripture Study Questions starting on page 67:

2. How/why did they change?

The opportunity for Paul to present the Gospel to Lydia would not have happened had he not had the other roadblocks. If there was ever a passage which taught us that God is the one who invites us to himself, this is it.

3. What happens in Lydia's life as a result of this hearing of the Gospel?

She listened, she was given a trusting heart, she and her whole household given baptism – she offers hospitality and eventually hosts a house church. She picks up her own apostolic calling – joining in God's action in the world. There's no evidence that Lydia had any theological training – no special education. Not a religious professional in any way. She was open and intentional to hearing the Gospel – but she was a businesswoman.

invited

– Exploring Genuine Christian Invitation

Invited is a written resource intended to be used by groups and communities to help foster conversation about and exploration into the breadth and length and depth of invitation. We begin with the conviction that invitation is at the very heart of the Gospel – that Jesus invites each one of us to come and follow him, and being an invitational people is at the very core of our identity as Christians.

Within these pages, you'll find six sessions addressing topics like 'why invite?' and 'whose invitation is it?' through guided discussion, prayer, and scripture study.

The material is flexible, engaging, and written in language you'll actually understand.

Invited is also a series of short films that seek to explore what it means to engage in genuine, Christian invitation. You can find all six episodes at www.spiritofinvitation.com – they're free to view and download, and don't miss the liner notes that go with each episode.

We hope you'll join the conversation.