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Introduction

Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies

Welcome to the conversation! The Bible study resources you are using are created to support the bold vision of the Book of Faith initiative that calls “the whole church to become more fluent in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture, in order that we might live into our calling as a people renewed, enlivened, empowered, and sent by the Word.”

Simply put, this initiative and these resources invite you to “Open Scripture. Join the Conversation.”

We enter into this conversation based on the promise that exploring the Bible deeply with others opens us to God working in and through us. God’s Word is life changing, church changing, and world changing. Lutheran approaches to Scripture provide a fruitful foundation for connecting Bible, life, and faith.

A Session Overview

Each session is divided into the following four key sections. The amount of time spent in each section may vary based on choices you make. The core Learner Session Guide is designed for 50 minutes. A session can be expanded to as much as 90 minutes by using the Bonus Activities that appear in the Leader Session Guide.

• Gather (10-15 minutes)

Time to check in, make introductions, review homework assignments, share an opening prayer, and use the Focus Activity to introduce learners to the Session Focus.

• Open Scripture (10-15 minutes)

The session Scripture text is read using a variety of methods and activities. Learners are asked to respond to a few general questions. As leader, you may want to capture initial thoughts or questions on paper for later review.

• Join the Conversation (25-55 minutes)

Learners explore the session Scripture text through core questions and activities that cover each of the four perspectives (see diagram on p. 6). The core Learner Session Guide material may be expanded through use of the Bonus Activities provided in the Leader Session Guide. Each session ends with a brief Wrap-up and prayer.

• Extending the Conversation (5 minutes)

Lists homework assignments, including next week’s session Scripture text. The leader may choose one or more items to assign for all. Each session also includes additional Enrichment options and may include For Further Reading suggestions.

A Method to Guide the Conversation

Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies has three primary goals:

- To increase biblical fluency;
- To encourage and facilitate informed small group conversation based on God’s Word; and
- To renew and empower us to carry out God’s mission for the sake of the world.

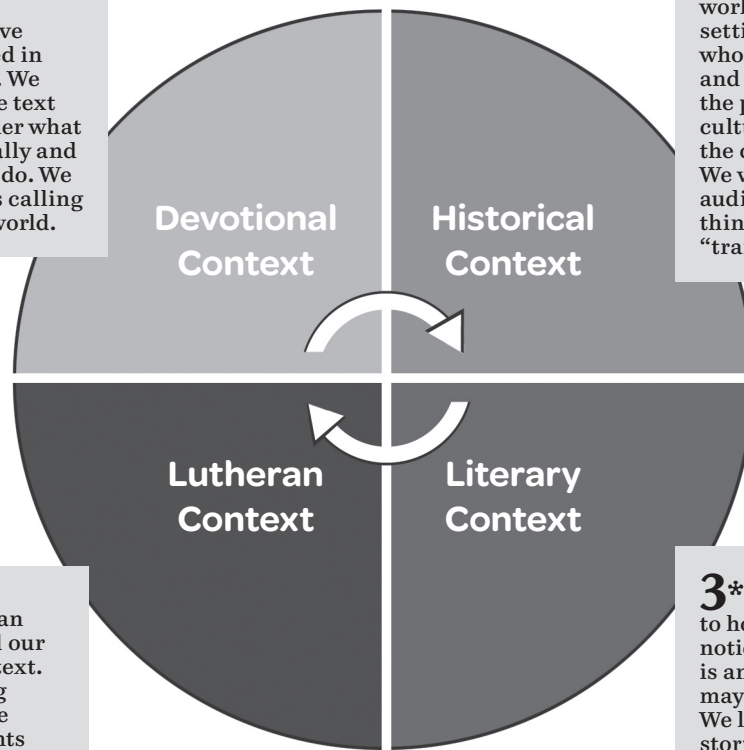
To accomplish these goals, each session will explore one or more primary Bible texts from four different angles and contexts—historical, literary, Lutheran, and devotional. These particular ways of exploring a text are not new, but used in combination they provide a full understanding of and experience with the text.

Complementing this approach is a commitment to engaging participants in active, learner-orientated Bible conversations. The resources call for prepared leaders to facilitate learner discovery, discussion, and activity. Active learning and frequent engagement with Scripture will lead to greater biblical fluency and encourage active faith.

1 We begin by reading the Bible text and reflecting on its meaning. We ask questions and identify items that are unclear. We bring our unique background and experience to the Bible, and the Bible meets us where we are.

5 We return to where we started, but now we have explored and experienced the Bible text from four different dimensions. We are ready to move into the “for” dimension. We have opened Scripture and joined in conversation for a purpose. We consider the meaning of the text for faithful living. We wonder what God is calling us (individually and as communities of faith) to do. We consider how God’s Word is calling us to do God’s work in the world.

2* We seek to understand the world of the Bible and locate the setting of the text. We explore who may have written the text and why. We seek to understand the particular social and cultural contexts that influenced the content and the message. We wonder who the original audience may have been. We think about how these things “translate” to our world today.



4 We consider the Lutheran principles that help ground our interpretation of the Bible text. We ask questions that bring those principles and unique Lutheran theological insights into conversation with the text. We discover how our Lutheran insights can ground and focus our understanding and shape our faithful response to the text.

3* We pay close attention to how the text is written. We notice what kind of literature it is and how this type of literature may function or may be used. We look at the characters, the story line, and the themes. We compare and contrast these with our own understanding and experience of life. In this interchange, we discover meaning.

*** Sessions may begin with either Historical Context or Literary Context.**

The diagram on p. 6 summarizes the general way this method is intended to work. A more detailed introduction to the method used in Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies is available in *Opening the Book of Faith* (Augsburg Fortress, 2008).

The Learner Session Guide

The Learner Session Guide content is built on the four sections (see p. 5). The content included in the main “Join the Conversation” section is considered to be the core material needed to explore the session Scripture text. Each session includes a Focus Image that is used as part of an activity or question somewhere within the core session. Other visuals (maps, charts, photographs, and illustrations) may be included to help enhance the learner’s experience with the text and its key concepts.

The Leader Session Guide

For easy reference, the Leader Session Guide contains all the content included in the Learner Session Guide and more. The elements that are unique to the Leader Session Guide are the following:

- **Before You Begin**—Helpful tips to use as you prepare to lead the session.
- **Session Overview**—Contains detailed description of key themes and content covered in each of the four contexts (Historical, Literary, Lutheran, Devotional). Core questions and activities in the Learner Session Guide are intended to emerge directly from this Session Overview. Highlighted parts of the Session Overview provide a kind of “quick prep” for those wanting to do an initial scan of the key session themes and content.
- **Key Definitions**—Key terms or concepts that appear in the Session Overview may be illustrated or defined.
- **Facilitator’s Prayer**—To help the leader center on the session theme and leadership task.
- **Bonus Activities**—Optional activities included in each of the four sections of “Join the Conversation” used by the leader to expand the core session.

- **Tips**—A variety of helpful hints, instructions, or background content to aid leadership facilitation.
- **Looking Ahead**—Reminders to the leader about preparation for the upcoming session.

Leader and Learner

In Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies, the leader’s primary task is facilitating small group conversation and activity. These conversations are built around structured learning tasks. What is a structured learning task? It is an open question or activity that engages learners with new content and the resources they need to respond. Underlying this structured dialog approach are three primary assumptions about adult learners:

- Adult learners bring with them varied experiences and the capability to do active learning tasks;
- Adult learners learn best when they are invited to be actively involved in learning; and
- Adults are more accountable and engaged when active learning tasks are used.

Simply put, the goal is fluency in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture. How does one become fluent in a new language, proficient in building houses, or skilled at hitting a baseball? By practicing and doing in a hands-on way. Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies provides the kind of hands-on Bible exploration that will produce Bible-fluent learners equipped to do God’s work in the world.

Books of Faith Series

Book of Faith Adult Bible Studies includes several series and courses. This Philippians unit is part of the Books of Faith Series, which is designed to explore key themes and texts in the books of the Bible. Each book of the Bible reveals a unique story or message of faith. Many core themes and story lines and characters are shared by several books, but each book in its own right is a book of faith. Exploring these books of faith in depth opens us to the variety and richness of God’s written word for us.

Philippians Unit Overview

Philippians is a letter from Paul to the community of faith in Philippi. This community had supported Paul's ministry. Paul writes from prison to reassure the community that his ministry continues despite his situation. This study uses four paradoxes as lenses to look at Paul's letter.

Session 1 (Philippians 1:1-11; 2:14-18; 4:1-9) considers the paradox of "individual community." Through Baptism, an individual is claimed by God and claimed for community. Whether in joy or sorrow, pleasure or pain, an individual in Christian community does not rejoice in private or suffer alone. The community is established in God's ongoing work and promise through Christ's death and resurrection and joins in the mission of sharing the gospel. The mutual joy of community in Christ is a key theme throughout Philippians.

Session 2 (Philippians 1:12-30) considers the paradox of "joyful suffering." Through the power

of Jesus' death and resurrection, God gives us joy and confidence, even amid suffering. This is not joy "conjured up" by believers. It is a gift from God through the power of the gospel. This gift empowers Paul to rejoice despite his circumstances.

Session 3 (Philippians 2:1-13) considers the paradox of "free slave." The power of Jesus' death and resurrection sets us free from sin and death, and this sets us free to be servants to others. Empowered by God at work in us, we are called to live out the salvation given to us through Christ Jesus.

Session 4 (Philippians 3:10-21) considers the paradox of "downward ascent." The resurrection does not just promise that we will be changed in some other lifetime, but that we will be changed in this one. Through the power of the resurrection, life will have the last word.

SESSION ONE

Philippians 1:1-11; 2:14-18; 4:1-9



Focus Statement

Whether in joy or sorrow, pleasure or pain, an individual in Christian community does not rejoice in private or suffer alone.

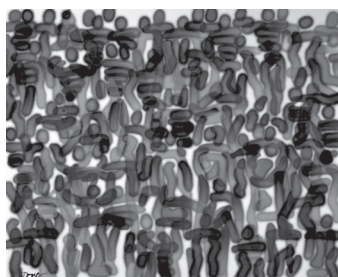


Key Verse

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. Philippians 1:3-5



Focus Image



Watercolored Figures, 1999, Diana Ong (b. 1940/Chinese-American). © Diana Ong / SuperStock

Individual Community

Session Preparation

Before You Begin . . .

In this first session, you will facilitate conversation based on a few passages from Paul's letter to the Philippians. These session Scripture texts describe Paul's desire for the people of Philippi to support one another and consider the needs of one another, to the degree that the community is of "one mind." Take a moment to reflect on how you experience individuality and community in your life.

Session Instructions

1. Read this Session Guide completely and highlight or underline any portions you wish to emphasize with the group. Note any Bonus Activities you wish to do.
2. If you plan to do any special activities, check to see what materials you'll need, if any.
3. Have extra Bibles on hand in case a member of the group forgets to bring one.

Session Overview

The session Scripture texts and the theme "individual community" consider the unique challenges and gifts of living life in Christian community. Paul wanted the community to relinquish petty concerns and quarrels and focus instead on living out faith together, serving the needs of others, and sharing the gospel.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

North American culture today encourages the belief that we are autonomous beings whose actions only affect ourselves. We have many opportunities to exercise individual freedom of choice and express personal opinions. Over time, freedom of choice has moved into the religious realm as well. At the communion rail, if you do not like wafers you can eat bread. If you believe it is unsanitary to drink from the same cup as the person next to you, you can use an individual cup. If you do not want wine, chances are juice is also available.

**Humilitas:**

This Latin word is translated as “low,” “humble,” or “from the earth.”

There was no room for this kind of autonomy and freedom of choice in the Roman Empire or in a Roman city like Philippi that was proud of its heritage and military standing. A key virtue in the Roman world was *humilitas* (humility), which aided in keeping a large group of people united. Each individual embodied honor or shame, for good or ill. The honorable person did not expose thoughts, emotions, fears, or weaknesses to the world or deviate from society’s behavioral norms (Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001], pp. 58–59). No honorable person in the Roman world would ever be on “Roman Reality TV,” laugh over a failing grade, boast about being “wasted” at a party, or exit a chariot with a toga hitched up around the waist. Such dishonorable actions would damage those whom the individual “represented”—the family, clan, town, etc.—and therefore would be considered shameful.

First-century Mediterranean culture focused on collectivism. People thought of themselves in terms of group, not individual, identity (Malina, p. 62). Group identity was how one represented oneself to the world, through a set of characteristics that defined everyone in the group, their relationship to one another, and their relationship to the outside world. In time this led to generalizations—however inaccurate—and then to racial slurs, such as Philo of Alexandria’s statement that an Egyptian is “by nature an evil eyed person” (*Against Flaccus*, 29, in *Philo IX*, trans. F. H. Colson, 10 vols., Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1941]) or even Nathanael’s question: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46; see also Titus 1:12: “Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons”). We may question how people could think that no one good thing—or person—could come from a certain place, but in Paul’s day people were bound by race and status. Nothing short of a miracle could change that.

**Koinonia:**

This Greek word can be translated as “sharing, participation, partnership, community.”

As Paul sits in prison and considers what he needs to write to the Philippians, he believes that his message is not sent to individuals in the community but to the individuals who *are* the community, the *koinonia*, because in his mind they are all one thing. At the same time, Paul is not naive about life in community. He knows that the body of Christ can both soothe the soul and wound the spirit. The community of believers can be a place of holy happiness or an environment in which hostility is sown, a seedbed of sickness rather than a healthcare facility for

sinners. It was imperative in those early years of the faith that harmony and reconciliation prevail so that people did not get the false impression that “nothing good comes from Philippi.” Certainly disagreement and dissension existed in Christian community, but presenting a unified front to the (Roman) world was essential.

LITERARY CONTEXT

Philippians is a letter from Paul to the community of faith in Philippi. Like other letters written by Paul, it includes a salutation or greeting, thanksgiving, the body of the letter, exhortations, and final greetings. Letters contained in the New Testament were originally written in *koine* (common) Greek, a form of the language known and used by most people in the Roman Empire at that time. Greek letters typically had three goals: to confirm the intimate, personal relationship between writer and receiver; to stir the embers of that relationship; and to exchange dialogue.

Paul writes this letter from prison, but this is his most joyful letter. In fact, a key theme throughout Philippians is the mutual joy of community in Christ. Established in God’s ongoing work and promise through Christ’s death and resurrection, the community of Christ joins together in the mission of sharing the gospel. Paul employs the literary device of repetition, using the word *koinonia*, to reinforce the theme of mutual joy in community.

In Paul’s time, meaningful human existence was defined by the way in which people related to one another and tended to the needs of each individual within a community in times of joy and dispute, pain and pleasure. The failure to live out *koinonia* could erode the public witness of the gospel message, which Paul fears might happen in the city of Philippi: “Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation” (Philippians 2:14-15a). Therefore, Paul begs the Philippians to help his coworkers who clearly have been publicly disagreeing over something (Philippians 4:2). We do not know the details of the disagreement between Euodia and Syntyche, but that hardly matters, nor does it matter that Paul places no blame. The women would have been horrified to discover that news of their conduct had reached a man in prison in another city!

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Paul rarely mentions individuals by name, so the mere fact that he singles out Euodia and Syntyche indicates three things. First, either these women are important to the community, or the Philippian Christians are a small enough group that Paul knows them all very well. Either is possible. We do know that these women were partners with Paul in ministry. In a society in which status was crucial, they may have been prophets or patrons in the community. Second, their dispute must have been a whopper if Paul had to be alerted to it. Third, by making their dispute public, Paul holds the entire community accountable for the argument and its resolution. Paul, a master of powerful rhetoric, essentially tells the community: “My chains do not prevent me from knowing that there are problems. Clean it up.” (For the high point of Paul’s rhetoric, see the Letter to Philemon, which is, in essence, Paul’s version of “Don’t make me come back there.”)

LUTHERAN CONTEXT

Although we may not recognize it, we do not create or build communities of faith. Christian community is a gift created by God. Reflecting on Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s writings, Robert Coles put it this way: “Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in which we may participate” (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Modern Spiritual Masters Series [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998], p. 73).

An individual becomes part of this community in Baptism, in which the individual is joined to Christ and his death and resurrection *and* joined to the body of Christ—the church, the community of faith. At the end of the Baptism liturgy, the newly baptized person is welcomed by the community.

DEVOTIONAL CONTEXT

The focus was on community, rather than the individual, in Paul’s day. In places like North America, the focus today has completely changed. Sociologist Robert N. Bellah says that “community” has largely been obliterated from the general North American Christian landscape. In its place, an obsession with “personality” has emerged, to the extent that individualism is “at the very core” of North American culture (*Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985], p. 142). For examples of this, consider how interactions with people in the same room or the same car can be affected by electronic devices that allow us to carry on outside conversations, use earphones to listen to our own music playlists, and constantly receive and respond to email messages. Moreover, Bellah states that this culture supports the belief that “anything

that would violate our right to think for ourselves, judge for ourselves, make our own decisions, live our lives as we see fit, is not only morally wrong, it is sacrilegious” (*Habits of the Heart*, p. 142).

This emphasis on individualism can make it difficult for us to hear what Paul says about community. Paul calls Christians to be of the “same mind” that was in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:5). What would that look like? What does it mean to be in the “same mind”? Paul S. Berge, professor emeritus of New Testament at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn., explains: “It is not that Christians are all to think or reason alike, but that they must strive to be ‘like-minded’ as members of the body of Christ” (*Servants and Stewards of the Gospel: A Stewardship Bible Study from Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1983], pp. 33–34). This does not mean that Christians are expected to automatically agree with each other, nor that Christians should agree with each other for the sake of agreement when something is clearly wrong or unethical. Rather, to be “like-minded” means to strive to do as Christ continuously did and as Christ continuously does through the individual Christian and through Christian communities: to act in humble service to those in need.

In Jesus, God was a visible presence on this earth. How Christians live out what we believe to be true is also very visible. And so, the body of Christ continues to be present in the world through the activity of the individual in the life of the community—in the celebration of liturgy and worship, the observance of the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, the confirmation of young adults, and all the activities that constitute our lives (marriage, divorce, illness, health, prosperity, poverty, births, and deaths). All activity in Christian community is a reflection and manifestation of life in the Spirit. In the church, the body of Christ, life shared in community can increase our joy and ease our pain (1 Corinthians 12:24–26).

Facilitator’s Prayer

God in heaven, through the Holy Spirit, guide me in creating a welcoming environment, facilitating fruitful conversation, and helping individual voices to be heard. As you continue to work in each of us, continue to build us into community established and called by the gospel. Amen.



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Tip:

Provide name tags for people to wear; even if they know one another, sometimes these are helpful reminders.

Having a special candle that is lit only during the class time is a nice touch and establishes that class time is “sacred.” (*Before lighting candles, check your local fire codes and your congregation’s policies regarding use of open flames. A battery-operated tea light or candle could be used instead.*)



Tip:

Consider bringing in and displaying an icon (or picture of an icon), Bible illustration, or Internet image of the apostle Paul.



Tip:

Invite the participants to pray the opening prayer together.



Tip:

Invite learners to do the Focus Activity in small groups of two or three.



Tip:

Consider recruiting readers in advance so they can look at the texts before reading them aloud.

Gather (10-15 minutes)

Check-in

Create a welcoming environment to set the tone for this session and all remaining sessions.

Welcome the group and facilitate introductions if people do not know one another. You might begin by asking learners to share why they decided to come to this Bible study.

Pray

God in heaven, open us to what we learn from Scripture and from one another today. Speak to us as individuals and as a small community of faith. As unique persons and as a group, strengthen us in faith through Paul’s encouraging words to the first-century Philippians. Amen.

Focus Activity

Reflect on the Focus Image. List some benefits and challenges of being an individual in a community.



Open Scripture (10-15 minutes)

Plan to read Philippians 1:1-11 out loud yourself. Ask for two volunteers to read the other texts for this session.

OR

Have one person read the session texts while the other learners imagine themselves receiving these words in a letter.

Read Philippians 1:1-11; 2:14-18; 4:1-9.

- What words or phrases are particularly interesting to you?
- What surprises you?
- What questions do you have?



Join the Conversation (25-55 minutes)

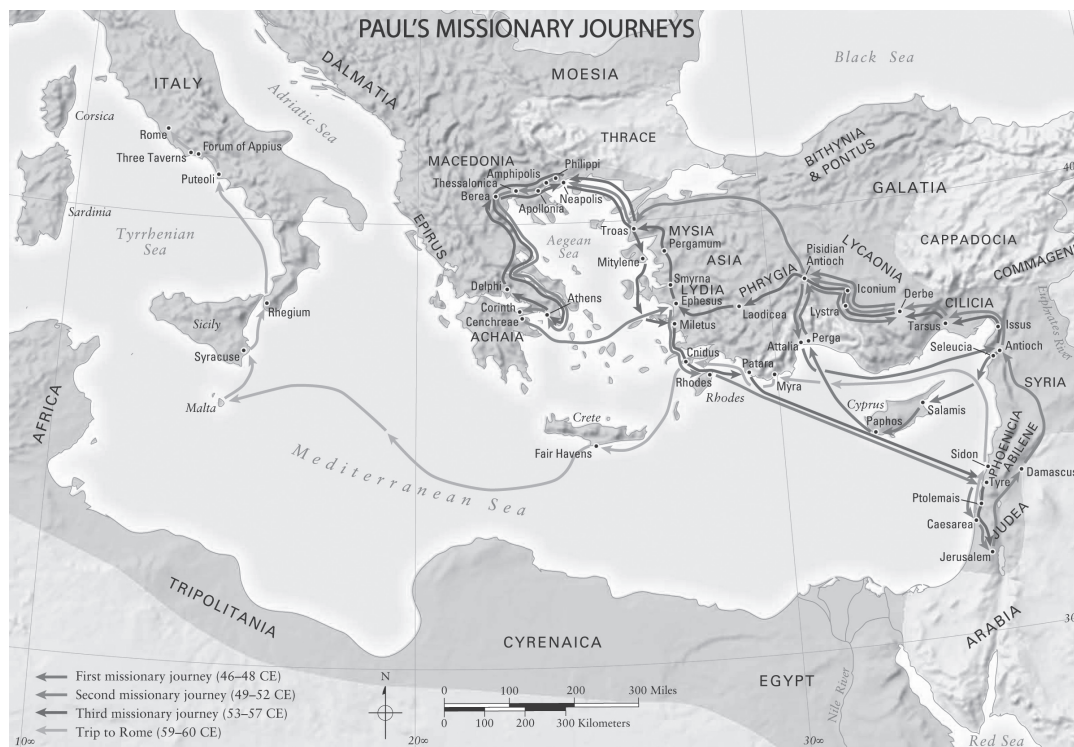
Historical Context

1. Paul, the writer of Philippians, was raised and educated in the Jewish faith. Early in his life, he persecuted followers of Jesus, but he became a missionary after the risen Christ appeared to him (Acts 9). He visited the modest but prosperous city of Philippi in 49 or 50 C.E. The first European city in which Paul preached, Philippi was located along the main road to Rome, the *Via Egnatia* (the ancient world's version of "Route 66"). Paul was in Troas when he received a vision and plea for him to go to Macedonia (Acts 16:6-12).

- On the map below, locate Troas (Troy), an ancient city in Mysia, and Philippi, an ancient city in Macedonia.
- Read Acts 16:4-12 and discuss what or who directed Paul and Timothy on this journey. At a time when travel was slow and difficult, what might have motivated them to continue traveling?

+ Bonus Activity:

Invite participants to make two lists of adjectives, one that describes community in the Roman Empire of the first century, and one that describes community in our twenty-first-century culture. Note the differences between the two communities. What might those differences reveal about the communities and the individuals within them?



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Tip:

List words and phrases on chart paper or a whiteboard.



Bonus Activity:

Tone is a literary device that reveals the emotional state or attitude of the speaker. Review the session Scripture texts and identify words and phrases that reveal Paul's emotional state and how he feels about the community in Philippi.



Tip:

Joy, which is mentioned throughout Philippians, is also discussed in Session 2, "Joyful Suffering."

2. The city of Philippi was not only located within the Roman Empire, it was founded and settled by Roman soldiers. In the Roman Empire there was no freedom of choice, and honorable people did not deviate from the norms of society—or even desire to do this. People thought of themselves in terms of group identity, not individual identity. This meant that an individual's dishonorable actions also dishonored the person's family, clan, town, and so on, and therefore were considered shameful. Jews were seen as "rebellious children" by the Roman Empire, and followers of Jesus were largely viewed in the same way.

- Why would it have been "shameful" for Christians in Philippi to be in disagreement with one another? What might have happened if these disagreements became public?
- Review Philippians 2:14-18 and 4:1-9, and list words and phrases that encourage the people to conduct themselves "honorably."

Literary Context

1. Philippians is a letter from Paul to the community of faith in Philippi. Like most letters, it begins with a salutation or greeting. Paul's letters generally include a section of thanksgiving as well.

- Read Philippians 1:1-11 and identify the salutation and thanksgiving sections. What are the reasons for Paul's joy and thanksgiving?
- All of the letters in the New Testament were originally written in *koine* (common) Greek, a form of the language known and used by most people in the Roman Empire. Greek letters typically had three goals: to confirm the relationship between writer and receiver, to strengthen that relationship, and to exchange ideas and conversation. Review Philippians 1:1-11; 2:14-18; and 4:1-9, and discuss whether Paul's letter fits with these goals. How would you describe the relationship between Paul and the Philippians?

2. A key theme in Philippians is the mutual joy of community in Christ. This community is established in God's ongoing work and promise through Christ's death and resurrection and joins in the mission of sharing the gospel. Paul introduces and reinforces the theme of mutual joy in community by repeating the Greek word *koinonia*, which refers to a partnership, sharing, participation, and common life together.

- Read Philippians 1:3-6; 2:1-2; 3:8-10; and 4:15-16, and note how *koinonia* is described in each passage. What similarities and differences do you see?

3. Near the end of the letter, Paul singles out two women in the community, Euodia and Syntyche. Because Paul mentions very few people by name in his letters, it seems that these women are prominent people in the community. Paul writes that they are his coworkers, along with Clement and others.

- Review Philippians 4:2-3. Considering the importance of group identity in the Roman Empire, what might it mean to be involved in a public disagreement within your church? Would having your name mentioned in a letter like this be a blessing or a burden? Why do you think Paul does this?

Lutheran Context

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor and theologian and a participant in the resistance to Nazism. Reflecting on Bonhoeffer's writings, Robert Coles states that "Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in which we may participate" (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Modern Spiritual Masters Series [Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998], p. 73).

- Community isn't something we create or pursue. It is a gift and reality created and built by God. What do you think about this? What might this mean for differences of opinion or disagreements within the community?

2. In Baptism, God is present and at work both in the individual and the community. The individual is joined to Christ and his death and resurrection *and* joined to the body of Christ—the church, the community of faith. We say to the newly baptized person, "We welcome you into the body of Christ and into the mission we share: join us in giving thanks and praise to God and bearing God's creative and redeeming word to all the world" (*ELW*, p. 231).

- Write a prayer of thanks for Baptism and for God's presence and work in your life and in the life of your faith community.

3. A *paradox* exists when two seemingly opposite things are at work at the same time or appear in the same statement. Martin Luther talked about paradoxes such as law and gospel and saint and sinner.

- In your own words, how would you explain the paradox in this session's title: Individual Community?



Bonus Activity:

Invite learners to name some ways they can participate in the gift of Christian community.



Tip:

The question about disagreements within the community could lead to excellent but rather lengthy conversation. Have learners discuss the question in groups of two or three so that everyone has an opportunity to be heard.

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Bonus Activity:

Have copies of *ELW* available. Read or sing the lyrics to “We All Are One in Mission” (*ELW* 576). How is this session’s theme of “Individual Community” reflected in these words?



Tip:

You might start discussing the impact of individualism by considering the benefits and drawbacks of personal electronic devices such as cell phones and mp3 players.



Tip:

Invite learners to tell about shared joys and concerns in groups of two or three. Be prepared to tell about an experience of your own to get discussion started.



Tip:

Distribute small slips of paper and pens. Invite learners to write down brief prayer requests (joys and concerns) for themselves, their families, the congregation, or their local and global communities. Collect the requests in a small box or basket, mix them up, and have each person draw one to read aloud during the closing prayer. (Another option is to simply invite learners to offer their own petitions during the prayer, if your group would be comfortable with this.)

Devotional Context

1. The focus was on community, rather than the individual, in Paul’s day. Today, sociologist Robert N. Bellah says that “community” has largely been obliterated, to the extent that individualism is “at the very core” of North American culture (*Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985], p. 142).

- What do you think about Bellah’s claim? List a few examples of individualism in North American culture.
- How has individualism impacted your life, family, congregation, community, and the nation in positive and negative ways?

2. Part of experiencing mutual joy in community includes sharing joys and concerns with each other. Tell about a time when life shared in community increased your joy or eased your pain.

Wrap-up

1. If there are any questions to explore further, write them on chart paper or a whiteboard. Ask for volunteers to do further research to share with the group at the next session.
2. Invite participants to share new insights gained in this session.
3. Invite participants to write down some ways that they were personally challenged by the ideas that were raised during this session and to think about these during the week.
4. Encourage members of the group to pray for each other during the week.

Pray

Holy God, creator of individuals and communities, be with us this week as we reflect on what we have learned here. Thank you for the gift of our individual selves and for the gift of Christian community. Hear the joys and concerns we share within this community. (Include prayer requests here.) Help us to support each other and the body of Christ, even when we disagree. All these things we ask in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Extending the Conversation (5 minutes)**Homework**

1. Read the next session's Bible text: Philippians 1:12-30.
2. Think about the many individuals who make up the communities you are involved in (your family, congregation, place of employment, and so on). During the week, observe how these individuals function within or on the margins of these communities, and seek small and kind ways to reach out to those on the margins. Pray that God will strengthen these communities.
3. Visit the Book of Faith Web site at www.bookoffaith.org. Consider creating or joining an online discussion for conversation on Philippians.

Enrichment

1. Listen and look for an example of the mutual joy of community in Christ. If possible, "capture" this example in a journal, photo, or sketch.
2. Visit the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) Web site at www.elca.org. Under the headings "What We Believe" and then "Social Issues," the site contains many statements that address how the ELCA seeks to care for others by addressing social issues. Choose a topic, read the statement or policy, and consider reporting back to the group on what you learn.

For Further Reading

Available at www.augsburgfortress.org/store:

Deeply Woven Roots: Improving the Quality of Life in Your Community by Gary R. Gunderson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). Congregations can make a profound difference in the struggle against problems such as violence, substance abuse, poverty, and alienating individualism. Gunderson provides a model for improving not only the health of congregations, but the health of the surrounding communities.

Life among the Lutherans by Garrison Keillor (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2009). This is a charming collection of stories, from a master storyteller, of life in Lutheran community.

**Tip:**

Encourage group members to read the Bible text for Session 2 and write down any thoughts or reactions they might have to "Joyful Suffering," that session's theme.

SESSION ONE

Signs of Belonging: Luther's Marks of the Church and the Christian Life by Mary E. Hinkle (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003). Luther's teaching on the seven marks of the church defines the community of Christ, and at the same time connects with individual Christians.

Looking Ahead

1. Read the next session's Bible text: Philippians 1:12-30.
2. Read through the Leader Guide for the next session and mark portions you wish to highlight for the group.
3. Make a checklist of any materials you'll need to do the Bonus Activities.
4. Pray for members of your group during the week.