

SOJOURNERS



Politically Divided Congregations:

A Curriculum for
Reconciliation and
Transformation

AUGUST 2021

Endorsements:

Colin Watson, Executive Director, Christian Reformed Church

I am excited by the prospect of using the Politically Divided Congregations curriculum as an added resource for our churches. The CRCNA has long championed the cause of biblical social justice, and this resource will be a valued addition to the toolkit. It provides practical ways to dialogue and engage in justice and advocacy issues in a way that will benefit the entire church. My thanks to Rev. Adam Taylor and Sojourners for the development of this resource.

Dr. Terri Owens, General Minister and President, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

This curriculum invites Christians of all perspectives to ground the conversation about social justice in Biblically and theologically grounded ways, a grounding which must undergird us as the body of Christ. This study gives us some approaches to sit with each other to listen deeply and craft a way forward in the midst of great polarization in the US as we bear witness to the limitless love of God.

Rev. Phil Haslanger, United Church of Christ

In a fractured nation with fractured congregations, this resource provides a pathway for reaching across the fractures without sacrificing - in fact, by embracing - the core teachings of Jesus. It gently leads participants through personal stories and deep listening to find the tools that will enable them to dismantle the dividing walls of hostility and to open new ways to embrace those we disagree with as partners on our common journey.

Rev. Dr. Richard Hamm, Disciples of Christ & Center for Congregations

This new curriculum is a gift to the whole church at a time when we are experiencing so much division, fear and pain. This is a marvelous tool for use by congregations everywhere that find their membership divided or at odds with people of their surrounding community. Follow the curriculum's suggested processes completely and you will find this to be an important spiritual journey for your people.

Sojourners Mission:

The mission of Sojourners is to articulate the biblical call to social justice, to inspire hope and build a movement to transform individuals, communities, the church, and the world.

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Why This Curriculum, Why Now?

The United States has experienced an alarming rise in cultural and political polarization, reaching levels not seen since the tumultuous 1960s. The 2020 election was one of the most contentious in our nation's history and the January 6th violent insurrection at the U.S. Capitol served as a stark reminder of our country's deep divisions and the continuing threat posed by the resurgence of white Christian nationalism. Public opinion polls show a majority of Americans not only dislike people from the opposing political party but now even distrust and hate them. Given these dire circumstances, what do we, as people of faith, do about it? Christ calls on us to love both the other as well as our enemies, which could serve as a powerful countervailing antidote to the increasingly contempt and acrimony in our politics.

Deepening polarization has also seeped into the church and threatens Christian unity, evangelism, and the public witness of the church. In the face of these alarming trends many pastors and church leaders have sought to keep politics out of their church to avoid dividing their congregations. However, the challenge is that following Christ has profound social, economic and political implications and that a commitment to justice is integral to Christian discipleship. There is real danger in both overly politicizing the church so that it becomes an appendage or pawn of a political party and/or ideological agenda and in the church becoming completely apolitical with no relevance or impact on addressing the most pressing issues and injustices.

Pastors and church leaders are navigating and confronting these unprecedented



challenges in what can be a hyper-charged atmosphere, often lacking good models and sufficient training and support. **The goal of this curriculum is to provide a biblical framework and rationale and practical tools and tips for politically divided churches to create space for civil dialogue around social and political issues and to provide a theological foundation for transformative, faith-inspired engagement in anti-racism and justice work.** The curriculum is designed to be sensitive to the challenges faced by congregations that are politically divided and/or that operate in very conservative parts of the country. The goal is to avoid further division and instead **to build bridges of deeper understanding and common action built upon a deeper and shared biblical understanding of justice.** The curriculum can and should be adapted and tailored as needed to support and resource congregations that have different needs and face distinctive challenges.

Is This Curriculum Right For My Church?



This course may be delivered in face-to-face, webinar, or hybrid format. Each session is designed to last about 90 minutes. Its aim is to introduce politically divided congregations to the history, theology, biblical foundation, and practice of nondenominational, faith-based social justice advocacy and action. It seeks to inspire passion for the eradication of oppression, poverty, and injustice as neither political nor partisan undertakings but rather as biblical mandates and Christian responsibilities.

Why Is Living Out Our Faith Linked to Justice?

As people of faith, we fully embrace the inextricable interconnectedness of Jesus and justice. We believe that to be silent in the face of injustice, racism, xenophobia, greed, violence, and other social ills is to become complicit in their perpetuation and, therefore, to abdicate our moral responsibility to God and humanity. We, therefore, reject the notion that holding civic government and politicians accountable to the universal principles of love, justice, fairness, equality, and anti-racism is not the role of the church. Prophetic speech and activism are not only the role of the church but also the responsibility of the church.

Why Should My Church Get Involved in Prophetic Ministry?

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in *Strength to Love*, "The church must be reminded that we are neither the master nor the slave of the state, but rather the conscience of the state." In that spirit, and in the spirit of the late John Lewis, who was called "The Conscience of Congress," we believe that the church is called to lift a prophetic but nonpartisan voice for justice and righteousness to ensure the just, moral, and ethical integrity of local, state, and national governments and to hold the state at all levels accountable to the people it serves, particularly in the context of protecting and uplifting the most marginalized and vulnerable.

What Is the Risk to Our Church?

The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, in the Free Exercise Clause, guarantees the right of all religious bodies to express their faith without interference from the government. The Johnson Amendment, a provision in the U.S. tax code, protects the charitable sector, including houses of worship, from candidates seeking endorsements during political campaigns. Houses of worship and other 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organizations should not become cogs in the partisan political machine but are allowed to support or speak out prophetically against laws or policies they may view as unjust or antithetical to their beliefs (bjconline.org).

What *Can* Churches Do?

The Johnson Amendment, as it is currently written, preserves the nonpartisan character of the charitable sector and applies to all 501(c)3 organizations, including churches and pastors (bjconline.org). Churches may form a social justice ministry, recruit volunteers, host educational seminars, watch and pray for desired results, post positions on social media, and more.

What *Can't* Churches Do?

Churches are not allowed to endorse a particular candidate with tax-deductible dollars. Churches may not use church property to endorse certain candidates for office.

Tips for Using This Curriculum

Each session will require advance planning and preparation. Specific suggestions are made in the Tips for Group Leader section at the beginning of each module and tailored to the material that will be presented.

At the beginning of the first session use these suggested Community Agreements to get concurrence on how group discussions will be conducted. Read them out loud or print and share them. Others may be added, as the group determines. Consider revisiting them at the start of subsequent sessions.



Community Agreements

- Be aware of intent and impact. Words often mean different things to different people and can carry unintended meanings. We will make an extra effort to use words that will not carry a different meaning than we intend. And when we do unintentionally say something that is received with harm, we will own it by prioritizing the healing of the person experiencing harm. Clarifying intent rarely brings healing to the one harmed. If someone receives something we say in a different way than intended, we will look at it as an opportunity to learn and build a deeper relationship with that person.
- Be curious. When someone expresses a different political view than ours, rather than formulate a rebuttal we will inquire why that view matters to them and what experiences they have had to shape that view.
- Work toward clarification to gain a fuller understanding of the comment. We will seek understanding, healing, and restoration. We will express our discomfort or pain and allow the other person to reframe or clarify. In order to experience healing and forgiveness, we will communicate how the comments of others make us feel, and work toward restoration of relationships.
- Be curious about and careful with political talking points, such as “the top 1 percent will get 83 percent of the tax cuts under the new tax law” and “the Affordable Care Act puts the government between you and your doctor.” These can be so ingrained in us that we are often unaware of when we are saying them, of what we really mean when we say them, and of how others may receive them. When political talking points come up, we will ask for deeper meanings or importance and think through how they can be more

divisive or harmful than we intend. We are learning the skills for negotiating a social dynamic that has become fractured. Every time we find points of agreement, we are healing the social fabric.

- Be aware of introverts and extroverts. Those of us who tend to be extroverts will seek to show interest in hearing what others have to say. Those of us who tend to be introverts will try to push ourselves to share more.
- Silence is okay. In such a group as this, silence usually means people are thinking. It is not a gap that needs to be filled.
- Participants are welcome to pass or pass for now on any question.
- Avoid tokenization. If any part of someone's identity (race, gender, political persuasion, etc.) makes that person a minority, we will invite them to share as themselves and not as a representative of that identity. While we value and welcome their contributions, we also recognize that it can be stressful to share something that is different from the majority culture of the group. In that case, it is okay to pass.
- Avoid generalizing statements. We will frame statements as "from my perspective or experience" or use "I feel" statements.
- Commit to engaging the whole person. When we call someone a "Trump voter" or a "Socialist," it is easy to reduce them to the worst of what we associate with those labels, making it harder to see them as essential parts of the body of Christ.
- Commit to confidentiality. Knowing that what is said will not be repeated outside the group helps facilitate a safe environment for people to process their thoughts and feelings on challenging and sensitive topics.

Session 1: The Interconnectedness of the Body of Christ

Tips for Group Leader:

After welcoming participants, summarize the description and goals of this curriculum. Also go over with them the suggested ground rules for Community Commitments. Plan how you will present the scripture passage and background material, preparing outlines or visual aids if needed. Have the necessary equipment set up to show the introductory video (about 5 minutes long) and the graphic, "The Hidden Tribes of America" (see link below), if you decide to use them. Gather newsprint, markers, and any other materials needed for recording comments in the group discussions

Opening Prayer:

Invite a participant to lead the group in prayer, or pray the following prayer in unison:

God of grace and God of mercy, grant us your Spirit's presence in this moment of division in our nation and in our church. May we earnestly desire to go neither left nor right but deeper in Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

You do not have to discuss every question in the session. As the facilitator, you can select the questions based on the context of your church and the discussion flow.

Introductory Video:



Opening Questions:

1. What are your hopes for this group? Allow time for participants to respond to this question. Note that we are unlikely to resolve any of the hot-button topics being debated in the political campaigns or solve everything dividing our country. But we are looking to build a framework for ongoing engagement, reconciliation, and transformation.

How would you describe the church's (your own church's and the greater church's) current engagement in politics?

Review the political landscape in America using the graph developed in the 2018 report "The Hidden Tribes of America": <https://hiddentribes.us/#americas-hidden-tribes>

Break into pairs to discuss, then report back to the group.

Scripture Passage: 1 Corinthians 12:12-27¹

(12) For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. (13) For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (14) Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

(15) If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. (16) And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. (17) If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? (18) But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. (19) If all were a single member, where would the body be? (20) As it is, there are many members, yet one body.

(21) The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." (22) On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, (23) and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; (24) whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, (25) that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. (26) If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

(27) Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Background Material: 1 Corinthians in Context

Before discussing the scripture passage, we first need to set it in its context. Corinth, located about 40 miles southwest of Athens, was known as a place of hedonistic pleasure and ostentatious wealth. But behind this wealth was pervasive and severe poverty and a culture that often abused and neglected the poor. Sadly, Corinth had become a byword for vice. To make matters worse, Corinthian society was riddled with competitive individualism, and idolatry, which spilled over into relations within the church.

In the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, we learn that one of Paul's primary concerns in writing the letter was to address the factions that were building in the church in Corinth. Feuding groups, built around the personalities and teachings of rival leading figures from different house churches, argued over theology, proper Christian conduct, and worship.

It is also helpful to understand that the Greco-Roman world was highly stratified. The elites were largely defined by their level of education. Intellectual professions (medicine, law, finance, and especially academia) held even greater power and status than they do today. Wisdom was one of the highest virtues, while foolishness was considered one of the worst character flaws. As a result, the intellectual elites looked down upon working-class people (skilled laborers, domestic workers, shepherds, etc.) as dirty, unsophisticated, and of low character. We see this as Paul points out how, despite his advanced education, he worked with his hands as a tentmaker in order to finance his missionary work².

Another important part of this class system was a strong honor and shame culture that was transactional in nature: actions, behavior, and relationships (both familial and social) either added to one's honor or increased one's shame. Simply being in the same room as someone of a different social class could increase one's honor or shame.

The early Christian churches, in contrast, were marked by considerable socio-economic diversity in an era when classes rarely interacted with one another in a social setting. Throughout 1 Corinthians, however, Paul makes clear that it is not enough for people of different classes to simply occupy the same space. In chapter 11, Paul explains that privileges and divisions that exist outside the church have no place inside the church. When churches eat together, people of higher classes have no more right to food than people of lower classes. Outside the church, higher-class people could eat as much as they wanted from a dinner or banquet table, while lower-class people needed to wait until the upper-class people finished before they were allowed to eat. Paul rebukes the Corinthian Christians for allowing this custom to enter the church culture.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul provides three timeless prescriptions that can help heal divisions within the body, including various forms of injustice. First, Paul argues in verse 26 that when one part of the body suffers, all parts suffer with it. Paul goes on to say that "those parts of the body that seem to be the weaker are indispensable" (verse 22). Finally, Paul reminds us that the "parts should have equal concern for each other" (verse 25). Paul calls us to demonstrate solidarity and love for our neighbor.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What do you hear Paul saying about the church (the body of Christ) in this passage?
 - a. What parts of society would the ears or eyes represent?
 - b. What parts of society would the hands and feet represent?
 - c. Why might parts of the body's head be inclined to say they do not need the hands or feet?
 - d. Why might the hands or feet feel they do not belong to the body?
2. What are some ways churches in the United States act as if they do not need other body parts?
 - a. How do some churches communicate that they do not welcome people with different political beliefs than their own?
 - b. How do some churches communicate this message outside of politics?
3. What are some ways your behavior indicates you do not need other parts of the body?
4. What parts of society are under-represented or not even present in your church? What are some ways your church communicates that you do not need them in your body? What parts are present but treated as less important? (Consider political perspectives, race, class, education levels, etc.)
5. A poll in April 2020 found that the shared experience of COVID-19 had increased America's sense of unity. "The total share of Americans who describe the country as unified has grown from 4% in 2018 to 32% today, while the percentage of Americans who regard the country as 'very divided' has dropped from 62% to just 22%. Almost half of Americans (46%) say that America now feels more united than before the pandemic and 82% say that we have 'more in common than what divides us.'"³
 - a. In what ways have you seen awareness of our interconnectedness increase since the outbreak started?
 - b. In what ways have you become more aware of the inequalities and disparities in the world? Of what vulnerable parts of society have you become more aware?
6. Is it possible for faithful followers of Christ to have different perspectives on the role of the church in advancing social justice? Why or why not?
7. Why do you think you might need people with different views on social justice as part of the body of Christ in your church? What do you think you could learn from them? How can they help you grow?
8. 1 Corinthians 12:26 says, "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it." How have you experienced this in your church or in your personal life?
 - a. No one likes to suffer needlessly or to see others suffer. What is lost when we try only to celebrate with a part of the body when it is honored but not to suffer with the part of the body that suffers?

- b. As we think about the class differences within the church in Corinth, what might it look like for us today for a more affluent person to suffer when a working-class person suffers? How can rejoicing among the affluent be enjoyed by the working class as well, rather than feared?
- c. What might it look like to suffer with someone from a different political party when they are suffering or to celebrate when they are honored? If you are experiencing a form of suffering because of your experience of something happening in the political arena, how would you want someone you know from the other party to respond?
- d. Roughly half of our country celebrated the results of the 2020 election, while roughly half did not. For many, the election outcome provided either a sense of stability and relief or uncertainty and fear. What can you or your church do to help heal the division within your church? Your community? In future elections, what steps can you and your church take to help those supporting the candidate who lost remain connected to the body and feel like valued members of the body?

Group Closing Exercise:

Go around the room and have each person to share one thing they found surprising about tonight. It could be about the meeting itself, a perspective they heard, a new insight, or different way of understanding themselves. Participants, as always, are welcome to pass on their turn.

If discussion questions remained, you can invite participants to reflect upon the remaining questions between meetings.

Closing Prayer:

Pray in unison the following prayer, often called the "Serenity Prayer" and attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, or pray a prayer of your own.

"God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Amen.

Session 2: Understanding Today's Disconnection and Polarization

Tips for Group Leader:

Plan how you will present the scripture passage and background material, preparing outlines or visual aids if needed. Gather newsprint, markers, and any other materials needed for recording comments in the group discussions.

This session explores some of the root causes behind the polarization that has developed within the United States and has also seeped into the church. To prepare for the discussion of polarization, you may want to send participants the following excerpt from the book **A More Perfect Union** by Sojourners President Adam Russell Taylor and suggest they read and reflect on it ahead of time:⁴

Opening Prayer:

Invite a participant to lead the group in prayer, or pray the following prayer in unison:

God of grace and God of mercy, grant us your Spirit's presence in this moment of deep division in our nation and in our church. May we earnestly desire to go neither left nor right but deeper in Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Andrew Hanauer, founder and CEO of the One America Movement ... makes an important distinction between polarization and toxic polarization, pointing out that polarization is common and even natural. Polarization says, "I disagree with you on this issue, but even if the issue is extremely important and I believe that you may be very wrong, we can compete in the political or social arena to win support for our perspectives and I can still respect you in the process." In contrast, toxic polarization says, "I don't know you, or you are a part of another group, so I assume the worst about you and act accordingly." In this vein my actions, then, cause you to hate and distrust me back. As a result of this vicious cycle, instead of trying to persuade or convince people on the other side who disagree with us, people become motivated to defeat or marginalize them. Winning, then, becomes the ultimate goal, and we grow more focused on protecting our group identity even more than advancing an ideology.

Taylor sees this process as shifting the focus from "love for your own party or group to hatred and distrust of the other party or group."

Scripture Passage: Acts 2:42-47

(42) They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (43) Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. (44) All who believed were together and had all things in common; (45) they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. (46) Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, (47) praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What do you observe about the early church community described in Acts 2?
2. The scene described in this passage took place immediately after Pentecost. Verse 41 says about 3,000 had just been added to their number. Verses 5-11 tell us this was a very diverse crowd, representing many cultural backgrounds. Imagine yourself as part of that community. Turn to your neighbor and share what it might have been like to be part of that community.
3. Very few, if any, churches today resemble this early church community. Why do you think that is?

Background Material: From Isolation to Polarization

While most scholars agree that Acts 2:42-47 was written as a description of the first days of the church rather than a prescription for how today's church should function, there are many ideals toward which we should still strive. We are a long way from a diverse community where people gather for worship and fellowship despite their differences. In fact, a 2018 Lifeway Research survey found that 57% of Protestant churchgoers ages 18-49 agreed with the statement, "I prefer to attend a church where people share my political views." With the advent of social media (and Americans' addiction to it), reality TV, and other media, this polarization has been exacerbated, creating self-imposed echo chambers and, in some cases, parallel realities. Unfortunately, this sense of polarization extends well beyond those 57% into nearly every aspect of our society.

Many pastors and sociologists believe one of the greatest factors contributing to our polarized nation is the increased sense of isolation we have collectively experienced over the past century. Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam's 1995 paper "Bowling Alone" brought this phenomenon to national attention. Putnam focused on how people in the mid-20th century were part of many different types of social organizations, ranging from lodges to bowling leagues to knitting circles. Today, churches, schools, and workplaces are the few remaining institutions where people regularly socialize with people outside their immediate social circles.

Studies show that 20% to 47% of Americans report regularly feeling lonely, with higher percentages among younger generations and senior citizens.⁵ Only 53% of Americans report having meaningful in-person interactions on a daily basis.⁶ Only 25% of Americans report being friends with at least one neighbor.⁷

Youth and young adult pastors around the country frequently report how loneliness contributes to increased levels of anxiety in Millennials and Gen Z. Add to these dramatic increases in isolation the Coronavirus pandemic, and the recipe for sharp increases in feelings of loneliness, even among the most extroverted, becomes painfully evident.⁸

Questions for Discussion:

Numerous factors contribute to our growing experience of isolation. As a group, brainstorm some factors you see contributing to this experience of isolation.

1. Twentieth-century America became the first time and place in human history where

people would ever live alone, a trend that continues into this century. In 2018, 28% of households were single-person households (44% in Manhattan), compared to 9% in 1950.⁹ How do you think this contributes to our sense of isolation?

2. If you have not already discussed it, how do you see the internet and social media contributing to a sense of isolation? What impact do the internet and social media have upon perceiving the image of God in others?
3. What are some ways you have experienced isolation?

Personal Reflection:

When we experience isolation, it is natural to seek out communities that act and believe as we do. When we feel isolated, connecting with communities that validate our beliefs and behavior can leave us less interested in interacting with communities that do not. Our quest for connection further isolates us from people different from us. This can contribute to an “us vs. them” mentality, reinforcing our sense that what we believe and do is right and good and what others believe and do is wrong and bad.

- List some of the groups you consider “your people” or “your group.”
- What do you value about this group or these groups?
- What do you wish would be different about this group or these groups?
- Social media offers an easy place for us to find groups of people who act and believe as we do. How do you see social media contributing to our isolation from people who act and believe differently from us? How have you experienced it contributing to an “us vs. them” mentality?
- Social media has been described as an echo chamber. Dictionary.com defines an echo chamber as “an environment in which the same opinions are repeatedly voiced and promoted, so that people are not exposed to opposing views.” How have you experienced that personally? How would you describe the echo chamber created by your personal social media experience? List all the places/sources from which you get your political information and analysis. Include news sites, radio and television, social media, blogs, selected media apps, or people/communities.
- Catherine Parks, an author and prominent blogger, believes that social media offers “a lot of room ... to promote fear of the other, fear of people that we don’t understand, or fear of our way of life being taken away, or fear of our rights being taken away ... this fear is motivating us to withdraw and retreat and kind of join with our tribe or our group and then we end up mischaracterizing the views of others”.¹⁰ In what ways do Parks’ comments connect with your experiences of social media?

When we look to political tribes as a new form of community, this creates an environment ripe for the spread of toxic polarization. The 2019 Barna Group’s *Faith Leadership in a Divided Culture* says, “We do not see our fellow man or woman as an image-bearer of God facing great challenges, but only as a person so identified with the label we have assigned to them that they may as well be wearing it on their T-shirt. ‘Black.’ ‘White.’ ‘Liberal.’ ‘Conservative.’ ‘Gay.’ ‘Straight.’”¹¹

We see this reality reflected in an October 2019 Pew Research Center study, which found that 55% of Republicans said Democrats are “more immoral” when compared with other

Americans, and 47% of Democrats said the same about Republicans. Just three years earlier, in 2016, 47% of Republicans and 35% of Democrats said members of the other party were less moral than other people.¹²

- If you associate with a political party, do you see the other party as more immoral than yours?

Andrew Hanauer, of the One America Movement, discusses how this cycle of polarization leads to “our group” becoming a central part of our identity. This can lead to people feeling pressure to be “good members of the group,” even when it is hard to define what it means to be a “good member of the group.”

- As you think about “your group(s),” what are some ways you feel an expectation to be a good member of that group? How important is your group identity as a Christian relative to other group identities that you hold?

Hanauer suggests that when membership in a particular group becomes a primary part of our identity, we may care more about being “good” group members than we do about the truth. This helps explain why we no longer agree on what constitutes “basic facts.” Adam Russell Taylor points to a September 2019 Pew Research Center study that found that 73% of the public—including 77% of Republicans and 72% of Democrats—say voters in both parties “not only disagree over plans and policies, but also cannot agree on basic facts.”¹³

- Turn to one group member and discuss what has stood out to you the most so far: What have you learned about the drivers of polarization? How do you see the websites you visit the most and those you follow on social media as contributing to polarization? What correlation do you see between the media you consume (including the amount of time you spend on social media) and the level of polarization you experience?

Background Material: Mind Patterns Contributing to Polarization

We often think of polarization as something other people cause and are unaware of our own contribution to polarization. It is true that polarization is at times weaponized for private or political gain. But it is important that we examine how we could be unintentionally contributing to it.

Human psychology offers a number of insights into ways our minds work that contribute to polarization. Below are short summaries of a few (the first four continuing Taylor’s engagement of Hanauer’s work). Consider how your mind might follow these patterns.

Meta-Perception: This has to do with how we perceive what other people think about us. If we perceive that they don’t like us, our defense mechanism is to not like them back. The problem is that we often think that other groups dislike us far more than they do. As a result, we often think the other side is more monolithic and extreme than it actually is, in large part, because the loudest, most strident, and most divisive voices speak for the other side.

Motive Misattribution: Our side acts out of love, while the other side acts out of hate. Once you allow yourself to think that way, it becomes harder to engage the other side.

To illustrate this point, Hanauer uses the example of imagining your initial reaction when someone cuts you off suddenly in traffic. You likely assume that they are mean, rude, were texting, etc., rather than assigning what could likely be a more benign or positive motive. This misattribution often fuels and feeds notions that the other side is “trying to take away our guns” or wants to “take away our health care.” It can also feed the notion that when our side messes up it is an anomaly, but when the other side messes up it is just who they are.

Halo Effect: This is the tendency for an impression created in one area to influence an opinion in another area. Often if we like something or someone, our brain assumes other related things or people are compatible. As a result, when we vote for and support a politician, our brains want to believe what that politician does is in line with our values. If we hear the politician being attacked, it can feel as though we are being attacked. If someone criticizes the politician, we can feel as though the person is saying something bad about us, even if we might otherwise agree with the critique.

Sacred Values: These are the non-negotiables in our lives. When politics hinges increasingly around our identity, we tend to treat more and more things as sacred and therefore nonnegotiable. This erodes trust in one another, building more walls between us.

Confirmation Bias: The Colossian Forum defines confirmation bias as “a well-studied phenomenon in which we all selectively seek, absorb, and remember information that confirms our current view of what is correct. The result is that we are highly resistant to accepting truth that counters our expectations. Not only do we all do this, but most of us are in denial that we do.” This reduces our ability to examine our own ideas and biases with a critical eye and increases our blind spots.¹⁴

Blame Displacement: Mark Sayers describes blame displacement this way: “Instead of examining and searching out the underlying causes creating toxicity, we focus on the symptoms, viewing them in isolation instead of seeing them as part of a systemic whole. Rather than taking a proactive approach that examines our ability to effect change in areas over which we have a responsibility, we retreat into a perpetual victim status, blaming others and external forces. As blame is thrown around, a cultural paralysis sets in. A suffocating fear of offending creates a gridlock, which prevents renewal.”¹⁵

Questions for Discussion:

1. As you reflect on the 2020 election cycle, which of these mind patterns did you experience? How has that affected how you engage people with whom you disagree?
2. When you recognize your mind working in ways that contribute to polarization, how can you stop it from influencing how you perceive or experience things? What steps can you take to do so?
3. Scripture and theology can speak deeply into our faults and wounds. These faults and wounds are often rooted in the twisting of truth into misconceptions or lies. Biblical and theological truth offers a path to healing and redemption. As you think about the ways we contribute to polarization and the ways we have been hurt by polarization, what biblical passages or theological truths come to mind that can bring healing and redemption?

4. As we think about this study, what can this group do to minister to people in our church who are experiencing polarization?
- As we think about the growing sense of isolation, especially among young adults, what kind of ministry could our church develop to reach out to people experiencing isolation?
 - What can this group do to offer support and pastoral care to people experiencing polarization?
 - What discipleship resources could this group or your congregation provide for people experiencing polarization in their lives outside the church?

Group Closing Exercise:

Over the course of the following week/until the next meeting

As you think about the impact of social media on isolation and polarization, consider on a personal level, what changes do you want to make in how you engage social media? If you are not on social media, observe how the news sources you engage with may be contributing to polarization. Notice how often the framing of a news story reinforces polarization or personality contributes to potentially toxic polarization.

Closing Prayer:

Pray in unison the following prayer, often called the "Serenity Prayer" and attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, or pray a prayer of your own.

"God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Amen.

Session 3: Focusing on Stories

Tips for Group Leader:

Plan how you will present the scripture passage and background material, preparing outlines or visual aids if needed. Gather newsprint, markers, and any other materials needed for recording comments in the group discussions. Plan how to introduce the group exercises on sharing stories and political values.

After welcoming participants, have them consider for a minute or two, without comment, the following quote from Paul Miller, lead researcher for the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission's report, "Faith and Healthy Democracy":

"We argue in bad faith: we argue only to score points, not to persuade one another—which makes sense, because no one listens to anyone else anyway. Public debate is a national exercise in confirmation bias."

Opening Prayer:

Invite a participant to lead the group in prayer, or pray the following prayer in unison:

God of grace and God of mercy, grant us your Spirit's presence in this moment of deep division in our nation and in our church. May we earnestly desire to go neither left nor right but deeper in Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Scripture Passage: Genesis 1:26-31

(26) Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." (27) So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them male and female he created them. (28) God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (29) God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. (30) And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. (31) God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Considering the different types of news media and social media, conversations with friends and family, etc., how would you describe the state of public discourse today?
2. Describe how we treat one another in our public discourse.
3. How do you think God feels about the state of public discourse?
4. How do you think God feels about how we treat one another in our public discourse?
5. What do you observe about how God created us as described in Genesis 1:26-31?
6. What does this passage say about how God created us to relate to God?
7. What does it mean to you that you were created in the image of God?
8. Which humans were created in the image of God? What does that suggest about human dignity and equality?
9. When God saw the previous five days of creation, God saw that they were good. When God saw humanity, God saw that it was very good. How often do you feel you are treated as someone God describes as very good? How often do you think of people with whom you disagree as someone God describes as very good?
10. While biblical scholars present many different understandings about what it means that we are created in the image of God, most agree that it means that we are called to reflect God's glory and character to the world and that every person has equal worth and dignity.
 - a. What are some ways you see someone in the group reflecting God's glory and character to the world?
 - b. What are some ways you see your church reflecting God's glory and character to the world?
 - c. What are some ways you would like to grow in reflecting God's glory and character to the world?
11. Not only are you created in God's image, but so is every other person on this planet. It is easy to think of the people we like as being created in God's image, but it can be harder to think of people with whom we disagree as being created in God's image. Think about someone with whom you disagree politically. Are they created in the image of God? Turn to your neighbor and discuss these three questions:
 - a. Describe the person with whom you disagree politically.
 - b. How do you see the image of God reflected in them?
 - c. What are some ways you see that person reflecting God's glory and character to the world?
12. In our public discourse, we often forget there is a real person behind the thoughts and ideas being debated. It is easy to place a greater emphasis on being right than on being in right relationship with other people. Being in right relationship with others is

a Christian calling, but that does not mean erasing difference or distinction. When we think about how everyone in the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12) is made in the image of God, is it more important to be right or to be in right relationship with others? What are some ways you have prioritized being right over being in right relationship with someone?

Group Exercise: Sharing Our Stories

Forgetting about the image of God in others also creates distance between us. As distance grows between people, it becomes easier to denigrate the image of God in people with whom we disagree. Doing damage to the image of God in other people is a direct assault on God. It is essential that we strive to break down the distance between us and reconnect with the people behind the thoughts and ideas. Seeking the image of God in the people with whom we disagree is vital to healing and restoring the body of Christ.

One of the best ways to do this is to seek out the stories behind people's beliefs. In this session, we are going to spend some time listening to the stories that are behind the political beliefs of the people in the group. For the sake of this exercise, political views need to be far less important than the stories behind the political views. We need to treat the stories of people with other political views as being as sacred as our own stories.

Often when we listen to people with whom we disagree, we listen for the things with which we disagree. Instead, we can make an effort to set that aside and ask what we have to learn from someone's story. What might the Holy Spirit want us to hear in the stories and experiences of someone with whom we disagree?

When training people how to tell their stories, Alexia Salvatierra, Fuller Theological Seminary Academic Dean for the Center for the Study of Hispanic Church and Community and Assistant Professor of Mission and Global Transformation, often starts with this story:

In several regions of Africa, when a woman is pregnant, she must gather in the forest with other mothers and members of the community to discern the song of her baby. They all sing the song while she is giving birth so that the baby will be born well. When the baby grows up and begins on their education or career, or at any other important moments of life, they remember and sing their song. When they find their life partner, they sing a duet. When they are dying, the whole community sings their song. When a person has committed a crime, they also gather the community, place the offender in the middle, and sing them their song to remind them of who they are.¹⁶

With this story in the background, spend five minutes in silent reflection, writing answers to the following questions:

- What activities and experiences during your life's journey have made your heart sing?
- Reflect on a moment in your life when you were presented with a challenge and had to make a difficult choice. What choice did you make? What was the outcome? What values developed in you as a result?
- Where do you see the intersections between your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger?

Adam Russell Taylor, president of Sojourners, talks about how an essential part of understanding our own stories involves understanding the stories of our ancestors and parents. Salvatierra describes this as our legacy. To unpack how those who gave us our heart song influence who we are today, write responses to the following:

- Who from your family or your community has been a mentor and/or motivator for you?
- What did they do or say that made a difference positively or negatively and has had a lasting impact on your life?
- Which of their stories have influenced you the most?

As important as it is to understand the family and social systems that have shaped us, it is equally important to understand the larger communities with which we identify. Write responses to the following:

- Reflect on when your story became a part of the story of a larger community. How were you personally affected? How did your tears mix with the tears of others in your community (or in our world)? How did your dreams weave together with the dreams of others in your community? What choices did you make that reflect the people or things you value most?¹⁷
- How do your heart songs and legacies affect the communities to which you belong?

Invite participants to share with the group some of what they have written.

Group Exercise: Sharing Our Political Values

Now we are going to shift into sharing about what has shaped our political values. Spend five minutes writing down answers to these questions:

- What was your first memory of politics?
- What are three moments that you think shaped your political values?
- How has your faith shaped your political values (either broadly or at specific moments in your life)?
- When you think about the following groups or life experiences, would you describe them as liberal/Democrat, conservative/Republican, or moderate/independent:
 - Family of origin (parents, siblings, extended family)
 - City/town that shaped you growing up
 - Church you attended growing up (skip if you did not attend church while growing up)
 - First political candidate you admired
 - College/university environment (skip if you did not attend)
 - Current friends
 - Current or most recent workplace
 - Current church
 - Current political views
- Have your political views ever shifted or changed? Describe when or how that happened.
- What impact have your political beliefs or affiliations had on your faith?

Invite participants to share some of what they wrote with the group. Remember that the goal is to listen to everyone in the group and to listen for understanding. As others are sharing, pay attention to what you are learning about them. If there is something you do not understand, feel free to politely ask about it when they are finished sharing.

Group Closing Exercise:

Over the course of the following week/until the next meeting

Think about a book, film, or real-life person that you felt modeled a healthy balance of political values and their faith. What about their approach to living out their story and political values helped you remember their story/character/influence? Was it hard to think of someone? Easy?

Closing Prayer:

Pray in unison the following prayer, often called the "Serenity Prayer" and attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, or pray a prayer of your own.

"God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Amen.

Session 4: Reconciliation as Central to the Gospel

Tips for Group Leader:

The challenge for today's session will be for participants divided along ideological lines to talk frankly with each other about how they see various groups creating walls of hostility and attacking the image of God in people through their words and actions. When participants are ready to actively listen, asking clarifying questions when they disagree, they may prepare to enter this conversation. Encourage participants to decide if they are open to the conversation at this point. Let them know that is okay if they are not ready; they may choose to make it a step for later in this series, or even a follow-up step after the conclusion of the course.

Plan how you will present the scripture passage and background material, preparing outlines or visual aids if needed. Gather newsprint, markers, and any other materials needed for recording comments in the group discussions.

Opening Prayer:

Invite a participant to lead the group in prayer, or pray the following prayer in unison:

God of grace and God of mercy, grant us your Spirit's presence in this moment of deep division in our nation and in our church. May we earnestly desire to go neither left nor right but deeper in Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Scripture Passage: Ephesians 2:11-22

(11) So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— (12) remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. (13) But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

(14) For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. (15) He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, (16) and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. (17) So he came and proclaimed peace to you

who were far off and peace to those who were near; (18) for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

(19) So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, (20) built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. (21) In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; (22) in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Background Material: Tensions Among First-Century Christians

In our last session, we discussed the increased isolation and polarization we are experiencing as a country. Although this polarization has seemingly spiked in recent years, it is important to recognize that not everyone identifies strongly with a particular political party or ideology. The binary labels of right/left, conservative/liberal, Republican/Democrat are often misunderstood, and a large number of people flow along a continuum rather than holding to a fixed position. We ended our previous session with a discussion of how to address differences in ideology as part of our church's mission and as an act of discipleship. Often, the idea of mission is associated with the proclamation of the gospel. However, Michael Barram, in his book *Missional Economics*, redefines and broadens the term *mission*, recasting it "in terms of divine purposiveness and sending." Barram argues "that the church does not so much have a mission as much as it is called to be part of God's mission ... Correctly understood, then, the church is missional—sent into the world to participate in divine purposes—or it is nothing."¹⁸

Ephesians 2:11-22 immediately follows a presentation of the "good news" similar to many contemporary gospel presentations: discussion of the pre-Christian state of alienation from God, followed by salvation through faith in God's grace through Jesus (verses 1-10). The verses that follow pick up on the salvation theme and dive into part of the gospel that is often overlooked.

It is easy for us to underestimate how challenging it was for first-century Jewish Christians to receive Gentile Christians as equals. The Greek word for Gentile, *ethné*, is the root of the English words *ethnic*, *ethnicity*, etc. It directly translates as "nations" and was understood to mean anyone who was not Jewish.¹⁹ Jewish people saw foreigners as contaminating influences on Israel, grouping Gentiles with tax collectors as some of the most abject people in existence (Matthew 18:17).²⁰ The animosity toward non-Jews was immense.²¹

Circumcision was the primary mark for defining Jewish males. A man who was "uncircumcised" was ceremonially unclean and therefore unable to enter the sanctuary to worship God. Calling someone "uncircumcised" was a derogatory way of calling them "dirty" while also mocking their inability to enter the presence of God. (Notice Paul is careful to specify that he is not the one calling them such a name.) It is also important to note the inherent patriarchy in the practice of circumcision, in that it was not a practice required of Jewish women. For women, it was understood that the covenant had been inscribed on their hearts.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What language do you observe in the Ephesians passage that emphasizes how Gentiles were viewed as “not us” by the Jewish followers of Jesus?
2. How does this exclusionary language reflect how we engage people outside the church today? How might non-Christians experience how a lot of Christians think of or talk about them?
3. Think about your political leanings. What are some derogatory names or labels you or your party has been called?
4. Have other Christians ever called you any of those names?

Background Material: “The Dividing Wall of Hostility”

The image of “the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14) comes from the temple in Jerusalem, where the Court of the Gentiles was separated from the main temple by 19 stairs and two walls.²² In case this did not communicate clearly enough that Gentiles were not allowed inside the main temple, engraved in one of the pillars of the temple was a notice: “No man of another race is to enter within the fence and enclosure around the Temple. Whoever is caught will have only himself to thank for the death which follows.”²³ Acts 21 describes how Paul was nearly killed by a Jewish mob, then imprisoned over a false accusation of bringing a Gentile into the temple. (Paul likely wrote the letter to the Ephesians during this imprisonment.) Keep in mind that the Court of the Gentiles was where non-Jews interested in God went to worship. These walls were intended to physically prevent people who were eager to learn about God from being in the presence of God.

Verse 15 says Christ destroyed “the dividing wall of hostility” by “setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. The Old Testament law was meant as something that drew people closer to God, but by the first century it had become something Jewish people used to separate themselves from Gentiles and make themselves feel superior because of their privileged access to God. They saw adherence to the law as something that made them holier and cleaner than those around them, therein making them closer to God. The people of God were misusing the law to ignore their call to be a blessing to the nations. In the process, their concern for being corrupted by Gentile influences alienated others even further from God. So, God “set aside” the law to allow Gentiles to have access to salvation.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What did Jesus’ death on the cross do to “the dividing wall of hostility”?
2. What walls do we build that separate us from people outside our church?
3. What walls do we build that separate us from people of other political beliefs or parties?
4. What are some ways we have built laws or Christian traditions that prevent outsiders from having access to salvation?

5. When we think about politics, what values or practices do we claim as non-negotiable?
6. How do you connect those political non-negotiables to your faith? Do you see them as essential to your faith?
7. How might our political non-negotiables be experienced by others as walls, hindering their access to God?
8. How does considering that our political non-negotiables died along with Jesus on the cross affect how we think about reconciling with those with whom we have disagreed? What about the offensive ways others have talked about our non-negotiables—how can the work Jesus did on the cross influence how we feel about this?
9. Think back to our study on the image of God in Session 3. How do our political non-negotiables, along with the names and labels we call others, do damage to the image of God in others?
10. How do you see your party/party you identify with attacking the image of God in people from the other party? How do you see members of your party/party you identify with attacking the image of God in some of their policy preferences?

Group Exercise: Steps Toward Reconciliation

Ephesians 2:16 says the cross put to death our hostilities toward one another. When considering our political differences, we certainly struggle to live this out. John Stott writes:

But when we turn from the ideal portrayed in Scripture to the concrete realities experienced in the church today, it is a very different and tragic story. For even in the church there is often alienation, disunity and discord. And Christians erect new barriers in place of the old which Christ has demolished, now racism, nationalism or tribalism, now personal animosities provoked by pride, prejudice, jealousy and the unforgiving spirit, now a divisive system of caste or class, ... now a denominationalism which turns churches into sects and contradicts the unity and universality of Christ's church ... We need to get the failures of the church on our conscience, to feel the offence to Christ and the world which these failures are, to weep over the credibility gap between the church's talk and the church's walk, to repent of our readiness to excuse and even condone our failures, and to determine to do something about it.²⁴

Reconciliation is central to the church's identity. Just as God has reconciled creation to God's self through Jesus Christ, true reconciliation among Christ's followers requires a process that includes truth-telling, repentance, and a deep commitment to seeking justice. Thinking back to our opening study on the church as the body of Christ, and our discussion of the church's mission, why is it important for us to reconcile our political differences? How do we seek reconciliation in ways that don't force us to relinquish a commitment to truth-telling and to seeking justice, particularly for those who have been marginalized and oppressed?

The church is to be a place of reconciliation in the world. With this as part of our core theology, the church is the best hope for healing our nation's growing political divisions. Political reconciliation is one of the best opportunities for us to reflect the imago Dei to the

world. What are some concrete steps we can commit to taking toward reconciliation across the political divide?

At some point, we need to ask people from the other party how they perceive the party we identify with or lean toward. Do they see it creating hostilities and attacking the image of God in people through their words and actions? Enter into this conversation only if you are ready to actively listen to what others observe, asking clarifying questions when you disagree. As a group, decide if you are open to this conversation at this point. It is okay if you are not. You may instead choose to make it a next step for later in this series or even as a follow-up to the group.

Spend three minutes in silent confession: What hostilities do you hold toward people of the other political party? How do you struggle to put the hostilities to death? Take time to confess some of the hostilities you hold toward people with political views that are different from yours. Then allow time for participants to exercise the option of prayerfully confessing aloud. You may want to say together after each person speaks: "Have mercy on us, O God."

Closing Group Exercise:

Over the course of the following week/until the next meeting:

Notice when you experience hostilities arise over political values in other areas of your life—your reaction to a news story, facebook post, tv show, or conversations at work or another social group here at church. Take a moment to reflect on the experience and see it as an opportunity to see beyond the moment as we did together during this discussion.

Closing Prayer:

Pray in unison the following prayer, often called the "Serenity Prayer" and attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, or pray a prayer of your own.

"God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Amen.

Session 5: The Church in Crisis, Part 1

Tips for Group Leader:

Each session in this curriculum is designed to last about 90 minutes. Because of the amount of material covered in “The Church in Crisis,” the topic has been divided into two related sessions. Depending on participants’ availability and engagement, feel free to offer it as one longer session.

Plan how you will present the scripture passage and background material, preparing outlines or visual aids if needed. Gather newsprint, markers, and any other materials needed for recording comments in the group discussions. Have sticky notes available for the group activity.

This session includes a large number of statistics. Consider preparing and posting them on butcher paper or in PowerPoint for easy reference throughout the session.

Opening Prayer:

Invite a participant to lead the group in prayer, or pray the following prayer in unison:

God of grace and God of mercy, grant us your Spirit’s presence in this moment of deep division in our nation and in our church. May we earnestly desire to go neither left nor right but deeper in Christ. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Scripture Passage: Matthew 9:9-13

(9) As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him.

(10) And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. (11) When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

(12) But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. (13) Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

Background Material: God's Purpose for the Church

What is God's intended purpose for the church? Is it evangelism or social justice? Is it personal salvation or corporate liberation? In his book, *Mobilizing Hope*, Adam Russell Taylor argues that this false tension is "better reconciled ... through the concept of integral mission," a both/and theology of proclamation and action, evangelism and social action/justice, charity and justice.²⁵

In the last session, we discussed how a central part of the mission of the church is healing and reconciling divisions in our world. In the previous session, we discussed the increased isolation and polarization in American culture. This session dives into how that polarization is creating a crisis in the church and explores our role in bringing healing and reconciliation to that crisis.

The Matthew 9:9-13 passage highlights the significance of Matthew's profession. Israel was under the rule of a foreign Roman Empire. Matthew was collecting taxes from his fellow Jews to directly fund the government and the army that was colonizing and oppressing them. Additionally, tax collectors had a reputation for skimming off the top and living a lavish lifestyle themselves. So, Matthew and his colleagues were not just seen as fat cats getting rich while everyone else was suffering, but they also were seen as betraying their own people. It's no wonder the Pharisees were quick to criticize Jesus for associating with them.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What do you think about the people who gathered at Matthew's house for dinner with Jesus? How do you think the "tax collectors and sinners" would have felt at that party? Do you think they felt accepted by Jesus?
2. Where did the dinner party take place? Why does the location matter? How might it have been different if they gathered at the Jewish temple?
3. What does this passage say about Jesus' mission? What are the implications for the mission of the church?
4. What are some ways your church engages with people who do not feel welcome in a church building or who experience rejection from mainstream church culture?
5. William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury in the mid-20th century, observed, "The church is the only organization that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members." What specific things do you see your church doing for the benefit of those who are not its members? What about other churches?
6. Do you believe those who do not regularly go to church see the church as existing for them, or for its members? Why?

Group Activity: The Church as Others See Us

Invite participants to think of the top three things for which they think the greater church is known by people outside the church. Have each person write their top three, each on a separate sticky note, and post them on a designated section of wall in your meeting space.

Next, have them write on sticky notes the top three things for which your congregation is most known by people who do not go to your church. Post these notes on another designated section of wall.

Finally, write on sticky notes the top three things for which you think God wants the greater church to be known by people who are not part of a church. Post these on a third section of wall.

After everyone has posted their notes, take 5-10 minutes to quietly observe what has been written, thinking about the following questions:

- What do you observe about what was written?
- What differences do you see between each section?
- What are some things your church could do differently in response to this exercise?

Background Material: Statistics on Decline in American Christianity

The fastest growing religious demographic in the U.S. is “spiritual but nonreligious,” or the “nones.”

- A 2019 Pew Research Center survey showed 65% of American adults describe themselves as Christian, compared to 77% a decade ago.
- This decline only deviates by a few points when focusing on race, gender, socio-economic class, or branch of Christianity.
- A similar survey from the Barna Group (*State of the Church: 2020*) shows that in 2000, 45% of Americans were “practicing Christians” (identify as Christian, agree strongly that faith is very important in their lives, have attended church within the past month). In 2020, only 25% were practicing Christians. Half of those who identified as practicing Christians in 2000 are now nonpracticing Christians, and half are no longer Christian.
- The Southern Baptist Convention reported that its membership fell by nearly 1.5 million between 2006 and 2019.
- Those who identify as “nones” (atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular”) rose from 6% in 1991²⁶ to 17% in 2009 to 26% in 2019.²⁷
- The 2019 Pew survey shows that only 49% of Millennials (ages 23-38) identify as Christian, and 40% identify as “none.” Only 22% say they usually attend a religious service once a week. The rate of Millennials’ return to church as they grow older is much lower than that of previous generations.
- Today, 62% of Christians say they attend religious services at least once or twice a month, which is identical to the share who said the same in 2009. In other words, the nation’s overall rate of religious attendance is declining not because Christians are attending church less often, but rather because there are now fewer Christians as a share of the population (Pew Research Center).

Growing numbers of unchurched Americans have a negative view of Christianity.

- David Kinnaman’s book *unChristian* focuses on a Barna Group survey showing that in 2006, 38% of non-Christian Americans aged 16-29 had an overall negative impression of Christianity; 17% had a “very bad” impression. In contrast, in 1996, 85% of non-

Christian Americans had a positive impression of Christianity's role in society.²⁸ The non-Christians surveyed used the following words to describe Christianity:

- anti-homosexual—91% of respondents
 - judgmental—87%
 - hypocritical (saying one thing, doing another)—85%
 - old-fashioned—87%
 - too involved in politics—75%
 - out of touch with reality—72%
 - insensitive to others—70%
 - boring—68%
 - not accepting of other faiths—64%
 - confusing—61%²⁹
- The Barna Group has not repeated its 2006 survey, but in 2019, Barna found the most common descriptors of evangelicals by non-Christians were (in descending order): religiously conservative, politically conservative, narrow-minded, homophobic, puritanical, misogynistic, uptight, invasive, and racist.
 - Nearly half of nonreligious adults perceive Christianity to be extremist.³⁰
 - In 2019, Barna found that while practicing Christians firmly believe that Christian churches have a positive impact on their communities (66% very positive, 28% somewhat positive), the rest of the U.S. population is not as quick to sing their praises. Only about a quarter (27%) agrees that churches have a very positive impact—the same percentage (27%) who say it has no effect at all. The plurality of U.S. adults (38%) says it has just a somewhat positive impact. Non-Christians, meanwhile, are inclined toward indifference (39% no impact) or more willing to see harm in churches' local contributions (8% very negative, 10% somewhat negative).
 - In 2019, Barna also found that 54% of people over 18 believe evangelical Christians are actively trying to impose their values on others in the country.

Millennials who are opting out of church cite three factors with equal weight in their decision: 35% cite the church's irrelevance, its hypocrisy, and the moral failures of its leaders as reasons to check out of church altogether. In addition, two out of 10 unchurched Millennials say they feel God is missing in church, and one out of 10 senses that legitimate doubt is prohibited, starting at the front door (Barna, 2014).

Questions for Discussion:

1. Which statistic stood out the most to you? Why?
2. Why do you think so many people have left Christianity in the past decade? (The answer to this question is complex, with numerous scholars and church leaders offering a number of interconnected ideas. There is no one answer to this question, so do your best to brainstorm some ideas as to why people are leaving Christianity—culture wars, cultural expectations in your church, etc. Keep in mind that if you disagree with something someone says, be curious about why they think that. They might be aware of something that is not on your radar.)
3. What words do you think people outside your church would use to describe your church?

4. What role do you think scandals among church leaders (sexual abuse and misconduct, embezzlement, etc.) play in this crisis?
5. In their book *Good Faith*, Kinnaman and Lyons conclude that Christians are more known for what we are against than what we are for. Do you agree or disagree?
6. Do you know people who have left the church and maybe even Christianity? If you know their stories, share one with the group.

Group Closing Exercise:

Over the course of the following week/until the next meeting

Think of someone that you know who either no longer attends your church or church in general. Do you think that the way political values during the election season/high political tension moments were discussed among church members may have impacted their decision to stop attending or leave the church? Have you reached out to someone that you noticed is no longer attending and sought to hear about their experience? If you were going to invite a person to come to church with you and they asked you about the “political leanings” of the church, what answer would you share with them after participating in our discussions?

Closing Prayer:

Pray in unison the following prayer, often called the “Serenity Prayer” and attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, or pray a prayer of your own.

“God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Amen.

Session 6: The Church in Crisis, Part 2

Tips for Group Leader:

Plan how you will present the scripture passage and background material, preparing outlines or visual aids if needed. Gather newspaper, markers, and any other materials needed for recording comments in the group discussions.

This session includes a large number of statistics. Consider preparing and posting them on butcher paper or in PowerPoint for easy reference throughout the session.

The section on the Trump presidential administration might be the most challenging material in this study. As you work through it with the group, remember the goal is for participants to learn from one another as they work together toward the mission of the church. Even if you think people have moved on, the Trump administration and election are a recent, national situations where faith and political polarization were at the forefront and will serve as a shared experience to inform your discussions.

Also, this session references evangelicals heavily throughout. Even if you or your church does not identify as an evangelical church, for many who are not Christian, evangelicalism and Christianity are synonymous. This pattern is also reinforced in the media. Invite the group to expand the term “evangelical” to “Christian” and still engage in the discussion. Ask the group how they perceive evangelicals, evangelicalism and the evangelical public witness.

Opening Prayer:

Invite a participant to lead the group in prayer, or pray the following prayer in unison:

God of grace and God of mercy, grant us your Spirit's presence in this moment of deep division in our nation and in our church. May we earnestly desire to go neither left nor right but deeper in Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Scripture Passage: Matthew 9:9-13

(9) As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him.

(10) And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. (11) When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

(12) But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. (13) Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

Background Material: The Impact of Politics

The Southern Baptist Convention partnered with the Fetzer Institute to study the role of religion in the polarization of America's public square. The report quotes Michael Emerson, a leading scholar on race and the church: "For many people of color and even for young white folks there's been a suspicion that evangelical religion isn't religion; it's a political movement."³¹

Specifically, the report found that white evangelicals have a different set of political priorities than nonwhite evangelicals. White evangelicals are far more likely to list abortion, religious liberty, national security, or immigration as a top concern than African American evangelicals or Black Protestants. African Americans are more likely to list helping the needy, health care, and racial injustice. Evangelicals who attend church most frequently are least likely to say that helping the needy is a top concern. White evangelicals are the least likely (11%) to say racial injustice is a top concern.

According to a LifeWay Research survey cited in *Christianity Today*, young Christians were more likely to leave the church because of political and spiritual concerns in 2017 (70%) than 10 years earlier (52%).³²

The 2019 Pew Research survey reports: "Religious 'nones' now make up fully one-third of Democrats. And about six-in-ten people who identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party say they attend religious services no more than a few times a year. The ranks of religious 'nones' and infrequent churchgoers also are growing within the Republican Party, though they make up smaller shares of Republicans than Democrats" (16% of Republicans identify as "nones"³³).

The 2019 Harvard Cooperative Congressional Election Study found:

- 53% of Democrats identify as Christian
- 47% of white Americans identify as Democrat and Christian (down from 68% in 2009)
- 74% of Black Americans identify as Democrat and Christian (down from 84%)
- 71% of Latinx Americans identify as Democrat and Christian (down from 82%)³⁴

In 1991, 53% of liberals said they "knew God exists," but 36% said this in 2018.³⁵

NPR reported that in the 2020 national elections, not much changed in the voting patterns of white Protestant voters compared with 2016.³⁶

Analysis of 2018 exit polls found:³⁷

- 56% of Protestant Christians voted for Republican congressional candidates and 42% voted for Democrats
- 58% of those who say they attend a religious service once a week voted Republican, and 40% voted Democrat
- 68% of those who never attended a religious service in the past year voted Democrat, and 30% voted Republican

Analysis of 2020 voting data shows that:³⁸

- 77% of white voters who describe themselves as evangelical or born-again Christians voted for Trump

A 2019 Pew Research Center survey also found that 4 in 10 U.S. adults (including 6 in 10 among those who identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party) think religious conservatives have too much control over the Republican Party. At the same time, a third of Americans (including 6 in 10 among those who identify with or lean toward the GOP) say liberals who are not religious have too much control over the Democratic Party.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Which statistic stands out the most to you? Why?
2. What do these statistics about the relationship between political affiliation and church involvement suggest about how the church engages politics? What do they say about the effectiveness of the church in carrying out its mission?
3. How do you think someone from a different political party would feel coming to your church?
4. Is your church perceived as aligning with a political party? Which one? What impact does that perception have on your ability to live out your church's mission?
5. What is the impact of churches that do not publicly discuss politics? If an evangelical church in your community does not publicly discuss politics, what do you assume about its political position? What impact do you think this assumption has on the church's witness to people in the community who have left the church or who do not attend church?
6. How does the perception that the evangelical church is closely aligned with the Republican Party affect your church's mission?
7. If your church is majority white or majority white-led, it is likely that people outside your church associate your church with their assumptions about white evangelicalism. How does being associated with these political priorities affect the mission of your church?

Background Material: The Impact of Trump's Presidency

In an editorial published December 19, 2019, Mark Galli, the editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*, stated that Donald Trump needed to be removed as president of the United States. Three days later, Timothy Dalrymple, president and CEO of *Christianity Today*, expressed support of Galli's editorial. Here are some excerpts from Dalrymple's follow-up piece:

Out of love for Jesus and his church, not for political partisanship or intellectual elitism, *this* is why we feel compelled to say that the alliance of American evangelicalism with this presidency has wrought enormous damage to Christian witness. It has alienated many of our children and grandchildren. It has harmed African American, Hispanic American, and Asian American brothers and sisters. And it has undercut the efforts of countless missionaries who labor in the far fields of the Lord. While the Trump administration may be

well regarded in some countries, in many more the perception of wholesale evangelical support for the administration has made toxic the reputation of the Bride of Christ.

... This is not merely about impeachment, or even merely about President Trump. He is not the sickness. He is a symptom of a sickness that began before him, which is the hyper-politicization of the American church. This is a danger for all of us, wherever we fall on the political spectrum. Jesus said we should give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. With profound love and respect, we ask our brothers and sisters in Christ to consider whether they have given to Caesar what belongs only to God: their unconditional loyalty."

Let me protect against two misunderstandings. The problem is not that we as evangelicals are associated with the Trump administration's judicial appointments or its advocacy of life, family, and religious liberty. We are happy to celebrate the positive things the administration has accomplished. The problem is that we as evangelicals are also associated with President Trump's rampant immorality, greed, and corruption; his divisiveness and race-baiting; his cruelty and hostility to immigrants and refugees; and more. In other words, the problem is the wholeheartedness of the embrace. It is one thing to praise his accomplishments; it is another to excuse and deny his obvious misuses of power.

A few weeks later, thousands of evangelicals attended a political rally at King Jesus International Ministry, a largely Hispanic megachurch in Miami, to launch the "Evangelicals for Trump" campaign. Several pastors of other evangelical megachurches laid their hands on the president while opening the event in prayer.

Then came January 6, 2021, a day that will live in democracy's infamy, marked by an insurrection at the U.S. Capitol led by white nationalists and white supremacists, many of whom carried signs and symbols of their Christian faith. As a result, Donald Trump went down in history as the only president to have been impeached twice, the second time for inciting the January 6 insurrection.

When confronted about their support for President Trump, many white evangelicals willingly overlook his moral shortcomings in exchange for his stand against abortion and his record-setting appointments of conservative judges, including three self-proclaimed originalist jurists, to the Supreme Court.

Questions for Discussion:

As a reminder, it is important to both express our views and listen to the views of those with whom we disagree. When someone says something with which you disagree, think about what you want to learn about their perspective rather than your argument against what they are saying.

1. Some have characterized the transactional support of Trump by evangelical Christians as a Faustian bargain. Can a Faustian bargain by followers of Jesus in the name of their faith ever be justified?
2. Do you agree with Timothy Dalrymple's assessment of the impact that evangelical support for President Trump has upon Christian witness?

3. Considering both your responses to these questions and the political divisions in this country, what are some ways your church could provide an authentic Christian witness by engaging in civil public reflection about Trump's presidency that would be received as "good news" by the public?

Background Material: Refocusing on Jesus

While a rapid decline in moral values in evangelicalism—especially around issues of structural and systemic racism—is alarming and needs to be engaged as a crisis, it also presents a tremendous opportunity for ministry. In his book, *Christ in Crisis*, Jim Wallis points out that much of what contributes to this crisis in the church has little to do with the actual person, teaching, and ministry of Jesus. By refocusing on Jesus, we can restore what Wallis calls "integrity of the faith" and bring healing to the church and to our land.

There are signs of hope. A 2020 Barna survey compared Bible reading patterns in 1993 and 2020. It found that in 1993, 34% of Americans read their Bible once a week. In 2020, 35% did. The survey also showed an interesting trend around prayer: In 1996, 83% of Americans prayed once a week. In 2010, it was also 83%. But in 2020, the percent of weekly pray-ers fell to 69%.⁴⁰ Despite the drop in prayer over the past decade, Americans remain interested in God and spirituality. There is a lot of opportunity for the church to reconnect with our mission to exist for nonmembers and re-engage those interested in God and spirituality.

Closing Group Exercise:

Over the course of the following week/until the next meeting

Think back to the body of Christ, as described in 1 Corinthians 12, and brainstorm some ways your church could engage politics that could re-engage those who have left the church or rarely attend church.

Building on our exercise from the last session, think of someone new or the same person you had in mind last week and reach out to someone who is not part of a church or who might feel alienated from the church. Ask them if they would be willing to have a conversation with you so you can learn more about their thoughts and feelings about the church. Ask them how they perceive the political values and faith values of the church and how important it is for them when deciding to attend a church. Remember, the goal of this exercise is to learn from others. It is not the time to try to convert or debate with them.

Closing Prayer:

Pray in unison the following prayer, often called the "Serenity Prayer" and attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, or pray a prayer of your own.

"God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Amen.

Session 7: Engaging Change

Tips for Group Leader:

Plan how you will present the scripture passage and background material, preparing outlines or visual aids if needed. Gather newsprint, markers, and any other materials needed for recording comments in the group discussions.

The last two sessions focused on the rapid decline in American Christianity and the crisis of integrity in the church. "Irrelevance, hypocrisy, outdatedness" are some of the most common reasons mentioned by those who have left the church or are uninterested in Christianity. Clearly, changes are needed. Change can be uncomfortable and challenging. Yet being open to change is essential for emptying and reconciliation. This session dives into how we engage change.

It is said that nobody likes changes but wet babies. While this may be true, it is not change that most people resist or fear but rather the insensitive or unempathetic implementation of change. This session aims to help participants welcome and engage change that is implemented with care. If some members of your group are comfortable speaking truth in love across the political spectrum, encourage them to do so. If they are not, then consider rephrasing the discussion questions to encourage people to examine their own beliefs. Ask, for example, "Whether you consider yourself liberal or conservative, what worldly patterns do you need to be careful not to embrace?"

Opening Prayer:

Invite a participant to lead the group in prayer, or pray the following prayer in unison:

God of grace and God of mercy, grant us your Spirit's presence in this moment of deep division in our nation and in our church. May we earnestly desire to go neither left nor right but deeper in Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Scripture Passage: Romans 12:1-5

(1) I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (2) Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

(3) For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. (4) For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, (5) so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Think of a time in your life when you changed: Maybe you changed your mind on a political topic. Maybe you experienced a significant change in your relationship with God, a friend, or a family member. Maybe you changed part of your lifestyle.
2. How have the following influenced your faith formation:
 - Bible
 - Sermons
 - Holy Spirit
 - Christian community
 - Social media
 - Your primary source of news
 - The arts (including music, movies, TV)
3. Which of the above influences are you willing to let change your thinking or behavior?
4. One of the central themes in the book of Romans is God's mercy through the cross. What does Romans 12:1-5 say about the impact of God's mercy on our lives?
 - What does it mean to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice?
 - What is the relationship between not conforming to the patterns of this world and being transformed by the renewing of our minds?
 - How does God's grace and mercy lead us to not think of ourselves more highly than we ought?
 - What does not thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought mean in relationship to the concept of the church as the body of Christ (see the discussion of 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 in Session 1)?
 - What does the renewal of our minds look like?
5. Adam Russell Taylor, president of Sojourners, writes about this passage: "Patterns of this world often become so normalized that we barely question their validity and often fail to comprehend the degree to which they circumscribe so much of our existence, keeping us from living our lives with a kingdom-like purpose and meaning."⁴¹ Building upon this insight, many have argued that we let politics shape our faith, rather than letting our faith shape our politics. In what ways have you experienced this personally?
 - Thinking about not conforming to the patterns of this world, how would you describe the worldly patterns of liberals/progressives?
 - How would you describe the worldly patterns of conservatives?
 - What do you think it looks like for liberals to renew their minds?
 - What does it look like for conservatives to renew their minds?

Background Material: Engaging Change in the World

As we think about the rapid decline of American Christianity and the crisis of integrity in the church, consider that one reason for leaving the church frequently given by departing members is the church's reluctance to change.⁴²

We live in the most rapidly changing period of human history. Gen Z (people born after 1997) understand politics, race, gender, sexuality, finances, careers, technology, and other aspects of life and culture in ways that are vastly different than those of Gen X or the Baby Boom generation. We have recently experienced how a pandemic can sweep across our planet, causing unimaginable change in only a few short months. Consider, for example, how COVID has forced churches to go virtual over the past year, and the reality that the post-pandemic church will look quite different from what it looked like prior to the year 2020. This type of change applies not only to the church but also to the world around us and to ourselves. We are not the same people we were this time last year, five years ago, or 20 years ago.

Some of these changes have been positive, and many of them offer opportunities the church can build on. We need to discern which parts of new ideas, movements, or actions are patterns of this world and which are the work of the Holy Spirit. Likewise, we need to determine what aspects of the past should be preserved or redeemed.

To engage change faithfully, it is essential that the church function as the body of Christ. Change generally elicits two types of reactions. For many, the natural reaction to change is to resist it. Others tend to greet change with excitement, adapting to it and embracing it very quickly. Both types of people have something important to contribute as the church faces change.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What have been some positive changes in the world during your lifetime? How can we keep and build on those changes?
2. What do we need to preserve or redeem from the past?
3. What are some ways the COVID-19 pandemic has changed your understanding of yourself, another person, the world, or God?
4. What does the Romans 12 passage have to say about how we should respond to change? What is the relationship between change and being transformed by the renewal of our minds? What caution does this passage offer about change?
5. Think about some of the changes in the world, or in the way we understand the world, that have happened in your lifetime.
 - Which ones are you grateful for? Why?
 - What changes have made you uncomfortable or scared?
 - Have your responses to some changes changed over time? How or why?
6. New ideas and experiences can prompt new questions about God, God's creation, how God relates to us, or how God wants us to relate to one another. This offers us the opportunity to "be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Change offers us the opportunity to experience God in new ways and be transformed in the process. How have some of the changes you have experienced brought new understandings of God?

7. Openness to being transformed by the renewing of our minds can mean that some of our most closely held values might be questioned.

- How do you feel about that?
- Is it possible for new perspectives to transform your values without shattering them?
- Are you willing to seek new perspectives on some of your closely held values if it might lead to reconciliation with those with whom you disagree?

8. One of the most challenging parts of being open to change is recognizing we might be wrong about something. Nobody likes to acknowledge they are wrong. What does Romans 12:3 have to say about that? How can being wrong be an opportunity to draw closer to God?

Individual Reflection: Engaging Other Political Views

Politics might be the area in our lives where we are most resistant to change. When someone presents a new idea, especially one that challenges our previously held beliefs, the natural reaction, even for those who usually embrace change quickly, is often to reject the new idea and hold more tightly to our existing views. But what if political disagreements were an opportunity to renew our minds and draw closer to God?

Take some time to explore what God might be doing in and through people with whom you disagree politically. Have you ever drawn closer to God or developed a new understanding of God as a result of a political or social disagreement?

Take five minutes and write down some things you respect about the other political party or someone with an opposite point of view. What are some things you want to learn from or about people who align with the other political party or who hold very different worldviews than your own?

Questions for Discussion:

1. Share some of the things you want to learn from people of different political parties or worldviews.
2. What would happen if those of us in the church strove to see political disagreement and change as opportunities for transformation through the renewing of our minds? What impact might that have on those who have left the church or who have never been part of the church?

Group Closing Exercise:

Over the course of the following week/until the next meeting

Are you willing to listen to and even learn from the people in the group who align with a political party other than yours? If so, find a time before the next session to talk with someone whose political views are different from yours. When you disagree, hold back your urge to debate or argue. Rather, be curious about why they see things the way they do, and why that is important to them. Invite them to respectfully challenge your ideas.

If you haven't already done so, reach out to someone who feels alienated by the church to learn more about their thoughts and feelings about the church.

Closing Prayer:

Pray in unison the following prayer, often called the "Serenity Prayer" and attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, or pray a prayer of your own.

"God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Amen.

Session 8: Dreaming God's Dreams Together and Planning Next Steps

Tips for Group Leader:

Plan how you will introduce and lead the "Dreaming Together" exercise, preparing outlines or visual aids if needed. Have available sticky notes and wall space for posting them. Gather newsprint, markers, and any other materials needed for recording comments in the group discussions.

As this study comes to a close, thank participants for their deep engagement with one another in the spirit of Christian love. Remind them that although the sessions may be concluding, their loving bridge-building with one another is just beginning.

Opening Prayer:

Invite a participant to lead the group in prayer, or pray the following prayer in unison:

God of grace and God of mercy, grant us your Spirit's presence in this moment of deep division in our nation and in our church. May we earnestly desire to go neither left nor right but deeper in Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Review and Reflection:

As this study concludes, take time to reflect together on the following questions:

1. What were some critical moments in the study for you personally? for the group?
2. What challenged you the most?
3. Do you see yourself having been changed by the series? If so, in what ways?
4. What did you learn from the closing group exercise assignment in Session 7 (talking with people who feel alienated from the church)? Without revealing any confidential information or gossiping, share a couple of stories from your conversations.
5. If you had a chance to talk with someone with whom you disagree politically, as suggested in Session 7, share something you learned through the experience.

Group Exercise: Dreaming Together

This exercise is intended to engage our theological imagination for creating the world as God intended. It is adapted from a group-organizing training curriculum by Alexia Salvatierra and Peter Heltzel. Their book includes this story:

In the early 1990s, the prolonged civil wars in Central America ended. Former Costa Rican President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Oscar Arias played an important role in this process through a behind-the-scenes, informal peace process in El Salvador and Guatemala. Until President Arias carried out his Roundtables for Peace, the formal peace process facilitated by the United Nations had been unsuccessful. The agreements achieved by Arias formed the basis for the final peace accords.

In both El Salvador and Guatemala, Arias invited top leaders of all the major sectors of society to attend a closed conversation. CEOs of major corporations, union presidents, the archbishop, the university presidents, and the directors of human rights organizations (as well as rebel leaders and national military generals) were included. The atmosphere in the beginning was tense; some of the participants had been directly or indirectly responsible for the death of one another's relatives. President Arias started the first session by asking each participant to write down their personal dreams and their dreams for their country on an index card. Each participant went to the front of the room, talked about their dreams and taped their card to the wall.

As the exercise went on, it became clear to all that their dreams for their country were essentially the same. Everyone wanted prosperity; everyone wanted the peace that is required to produce and sustain it. The atmosphere in the room changed and dialogue became possible. **The possibility for the future became more important than the pains of the past.** In Guatemala, the formal peace accords were signed one week after the Roundtable concluded and incorporated the points of agreement reached at the Roundtable.⁴³

If you were God and you could change your community in any way that you would like, what kind of community would you create? (If your church has a definition of the community to which it is called, use that. Otherwise, define your community however you like.) What would it look like? What sounds would you hear as you walked around the community? How would the community be structured? How would leadership work? What would it feel like to live there?

Have each participant write on sticky notes two dreams for the community (one dream per note). Be as specific as possible, thinking about the kind of change that you can create together and not just what you could do alone.

Invite everyone to share their dreams, posting their sticky notes on the wall to create a group "dream mural."

- What do you observe about your dreams?
- Which ones appear most often?
- Which ones surprised you or inspired you?

What do you see as God's dreams for your community? Write these down on sticky notes and share them with the group. Ask participants to come up with Bible passages or theological images/ideas that support each of God's dreams and add these to the sticky notes as you post them on the dream mural.

- How closely do your dreams and God's dreams match the current state of your community?
- What does it mean when God's dreams overlap with our dreams? If it is God's dream, maybe it's possible.

Designate someone to record all of the dreams posted on your dream mural and send them to participants after the study. Spend some time praying as a group for the fulfillment of these dreams.

Next Steps: Within Our Church

As we consider what we have learned during this study, especially about the mission of the church, what are some steps we can take to help make our dreams and God's dreams a reality?

Brainstorm ways to bring what we have experienced in this study group into the life of our church. (Keep in mind that most church members haven't spent the past weeks thinking about how to reconcile political differences.)

- What are a couple of ways you can share what you have learned from this group with the rest of the church?
- What are a couple of areas in which you would like to see your church grow?
- How can you help your church grow toward activating its dreams for your community?
- Is your church ready for the tools you have gained from this study? How might you best prepare the church to use them?

Look over the list of ideas shared during this discussion and decide on one or two steps your group will commit to taking. How will you keep each other accountable for taking those steps?

Next Steps: Outside Our Church:

With your church's external mission in mind, design an event, ministry, or other activity for your church to engage the surrounding community. For example, develop a project that will (1) engage people with whom we have interacted who feel alienated by the church, or (2) extend civil conversations around politics to the community.

If your group is big enough, feel free to split up and design multiple projects. Keep in mind the following:

- How can we serve those who do not feel they have a church home without pressuring them to formally recommit to the church?
- Are there other churches in your community that could partner with you in this project?

Decide on one or two steps your group will mobilize the church to pursue. How will you keep each other accountable for taking those steps?

On a note card, write down one or two next steps that you personally are committed to taking. Share these steps with the group. How will you keep each other accountable for taking those steps?

Spend some time praying as a group for each other and your church as you embark on next steps.

Closing Prayer:

Pray in unison the following prayer, often called the "Serenity Prayer" and attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, or pray a prayer of your own.

"God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Amen.

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Please help us evaluate this curriculum by answering the following questions via our online survey at www.sojo.net/congregationssurvey.

1. To what extent did you feel that the amount of information and resource materials provided met your congregation's needs?
 - A. To a great extent
 - B. To a moderate extent
 - C. Neutral
 - D. To a lesser extent
 - E. Not at all

2. To what extent do you believe that the curriculum provided a sufficient biblical framework for justice advocacy?
 - A. To a great extent
 - B. To a moderate extent
 - C. Neutral
 - D. To a lesser extent
 - E. Not at all

3. As a result of this curriculum, to what extent are you more confident in your ability to engage amicably and find common ground with fellow members who disagree with your political perspective on social issues?
 - A. To a great extent
 - B. To a moderate extent
 - C. Neutral
 - D. To a lesser extent
 - E. Not at all

4. To what extent does the curriculum align with the core values and/or mission statement of your church?
 - A. To a great extent
 - B. To a moderate extent
 - C. Neutral
 - D. To a lesser extent
 - E. Not at all

5. Focusing on the content of the curriculum, how much has your knowledge of faith-based social justice advocacy increased?
 - A. Exponentially
 - B. Moderately
 - C. Somewhat
 - D. Not much
 - E. Not at all

6. As a result of the activities in this curriculum, how much has your passion and commitment to advance racial justice/end systemic racism increased?
 - A. Exponentially
 - B. Moderately
 - C. Somewhat
 - D. Not much
 - E. Not at all

7. As a result of the activities in this curriculum, how much has your passion for the eradication of poverty increased?
 - A. Exponentially
 - B. Moderately
 - C. Somewhat
 - D. Not much
 - E. Not at all

8. Focusing on toxic polarization in your church, how likely are you to seek common ground around an existing polarizing issue to advocate for justice and the common good?
 - A. Very likely
 - B. Likely
 - C. Neither likely nor unlikely
 - D. Not likely
 - E. Not at all

9. Focusing on toxic polarization in your community, how likely are you to seek common ground around an existing local polarizing issue to advocate for justice and the common good?
 - A. Very likely
 - B. Likely
 - C. Neither likely nor unlikely
 - D. Not likely
 - E. Not at all

10. In 50 words or fewer, please share any thoughts about how your experience with this curriculum could have been more impactful.

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