



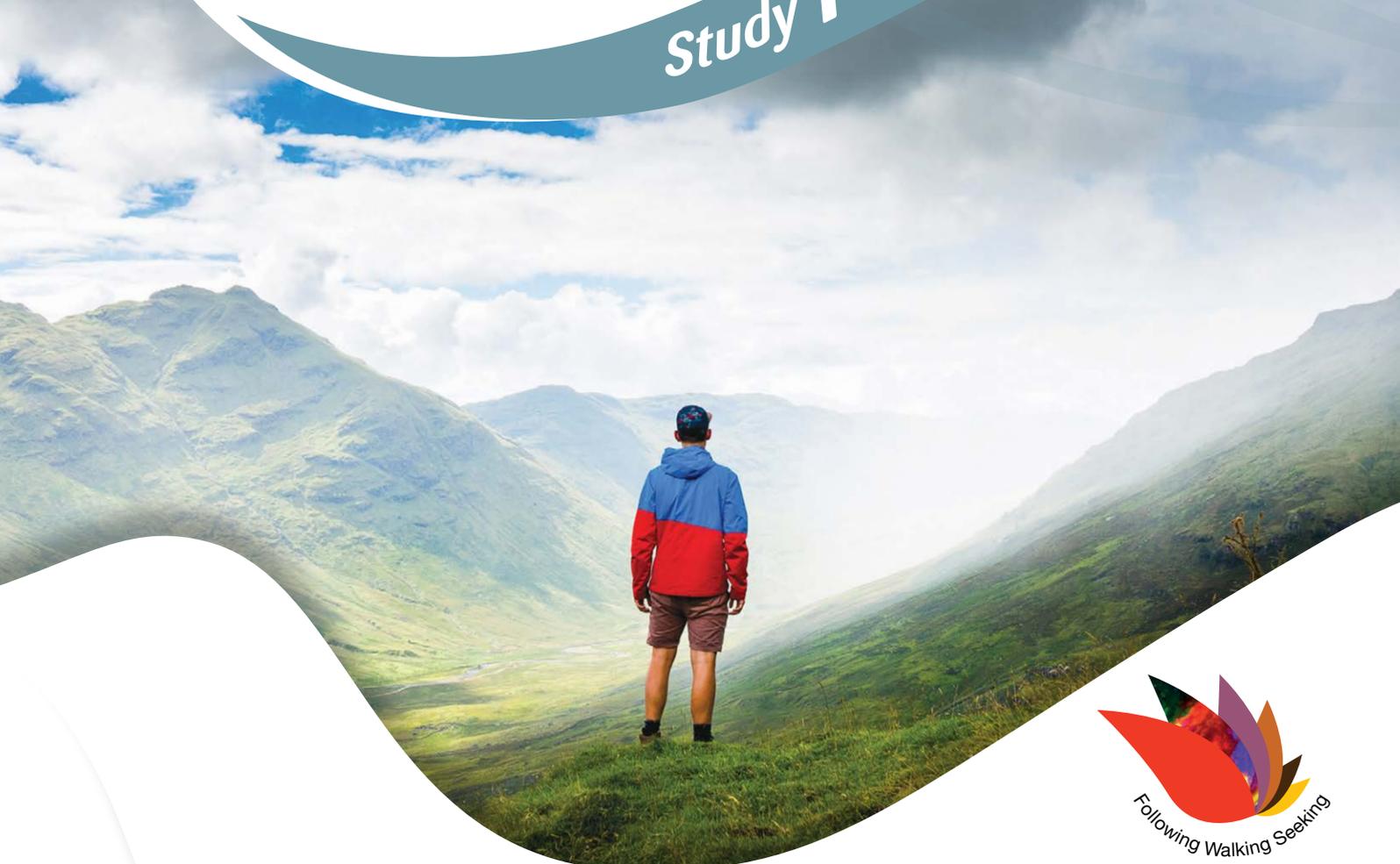
Uniting Church in Australia
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

Exploring the Vision

A study series
for small groups

**Following Christ,
walking together
as First and Second Peoples,
seeking community, compassion
and justice for all creation**

Study 1 Following Christ



Study 1

Following Christ

INTRODUCTION

The Synod's Vision Statement is a response to the call of Christ: "Come, follow me!"

The Statement reflects a determined desire, heard from consultations throughout the Church, to make sure Christ remains the centre of our personal and communal life. Such a call provokes us to:

- renew commitment to, and confidence in, following Christ;
- pursue practices that help us focus on both the 'being and doing' of following Christ; and
- follow Christ in life-long learning, reflection and thinking about our faith.

May this study help us to live authentically as people who continue to hear Christ's call:

"Come, follow me."

.....

GATHERING WORSHIP

Call to worship – share in the following by nominating a leader. Group responses are in **bold**.

Come into the fold of the Good Shepherd, to whom we belong.

The loving shepherd attends to all of our needs.

Come and rest in the presence of the Good Shepherd, who watches over us.

The faithful shepherd seeks only good for us.

Come and praise the Good Shepherd, who loves us to the end of life.

This trustworthy servant is worthy of our love and honour.

Come and follow the way of the Good Shepherd.

The self-giving shepherd is our model for loving service.

Let us worship the one who meets us in green pastures and preserves us from danger.

(Source: Call To Worship 2009-2010, Presbyterian Church USA)

Scripture - Mark 1:16-17a, 2:14

Have someone in the group slowly read the following verses from Mark's Gospel. Select a second person to repeat the reading after a time of silence lasting a minute or two. In the silence between readings, use your imagination to consider the reactions, thoughts and feelings of those who heard Jesus' words.

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me", Jesus said.

As Jesus walked along [beside the lake], he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

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Pray together – in sung or spoken word – the following two verses from *The Summons* (All Together OK 413)

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?

Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?

***Will you let my love be shown? Will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?***

Lord your summons echoes true when you but call my name.

Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.

In Your company I'll go where Your love and footsteps show.

Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me.

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EXPLORING THE THEME

“Following Christ” – these two words have profound consequences.

From the paper *‘Theological Reflections on the Vision and Mission Principles’*¹ we read:

Our faith does not begin with us but with Jesus Christ and his Way. We follow in his footsteps, called to a Way that leads through a cross to New Life. Jesus sets the pattern and by the presence of his Spirit nurtures us and transforms us as we follow him into the world.

This following of Christ is a community-creating and mission-participating call. It is a call to be a movement of disciples that forms a particular community. This community follows Christ into the world. In doing so, it shares in God's mission of hope and reconciliation in the world. Participation in God's mission for followers of Christ is not optional, but is at the heart of their calling and their serving in the world.

Sharing together:

In small groups of twos or threes:

Many would relate to following (supporting) a sports team or favourite player. Nowadays, many people would think of following someone on Twitter or Facebook. What do you think of when you hear the word ‘following’? When you think of following someone or something, what comes to mind? Briefly discuss together your thoughts.

Repeatedly in the Gospels, Jesus calls disciples with the words “follow me”. As you feel able, share together about your own sense of call to follow Christ.

Together as one larger group:

In the following sharing, sit quietly for a time before beginning and consider the invitation below. The group is asked to listen to each person's offering without further response or comment.

As you feel prompted, try to describe what it means to be called to follow Christ using only a brief phrase or simple sentence.

¹Available at: ucavictas.org.au/visionandmission/resources

Consider one of Jesus' first acts of public ministry in Matthew's Gospel. It is an account of the calling of the first disciples. Have someone in your group read aloud Matthew 4:18-25.

1. **Identify three scenes in the passage that refer to 'following'. What are the circumstances of each following moment? Are there similarities and differences?**
2. **What is the cost of following Christ for the fishermen? Is that the same cost for us today? What is the same and what is different?**

Finally, the narrative describes how Jesus' teaching and healing ministry attracts attention and his fame spreads throughout the region.

3. **Try to describe what motivates the crowd to follow Jesus. How does this differ from the fishermen? Does motivation matter when following Christ? If so, how?**

CONNECTING WITH SCRIPTURE

In this part of the study, groups consider a number of scriptural passages from John 10 that develop the theme of following Christ. The images of the shepherd and the sheep are explored in two parts.

Part 1: Following Jesus, the Good Shepherd

Have someone in the group read John 10:11-16.

Jesus declares in John 10:11, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." The relationship between a sheep and its shepherd gives insight into what it means to follow Christ. Yet the image needs some explanation for our culture because shepherds 2000 years ago were a little different from sheep farmers of our time.

When we consider sheep in the field in those times, we find they are not clean and white as seen in many pictorial representations. Their fleeces are muddy and dirty, and they can be smelly. They look fearful and cautious, and quite defenceless. They are not fast runners. The sheep are also weak-sighted, prone to be disoriented, and often stubborn. For them, the ever present shepherd means safety, guidance and provision of food and water. Without the shepherd they are vulnerable and may not survive.

4. **Following Christ is like following our shepherd – Jesus – as sheep. What feelings or ideas does this image for following Jesus offer for you?**

Interestingly, Jesus contrasts the shepherd with the hired hands saying: "The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away." By this means of contrast, Jesus seeks to teach his followers about the character of the Good Shepherd.

5. **Try to list as a group, some characteristics of the good shepherd that Jesus highlights and how these contrast with the hired hands. What do you feel is most significant in the list? Why?**

In verses 14-16, Jesus points to the nature of the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep. Here, Jesus declares: "I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father".

6. **Discuss together what you think the shepherd and the sheep each bring to the relationship. How can this relationship be "just as" the relationship between Jesus and the holy one he calls Father?**

Pause for a time of personal reflection:

Considering what you have discussed in Part 1, ask the following questions:

What have you found reassuring or challenging?

Name what is most precious to you in your relationship with Jesus the Good Shepherd?
Name what you feel is challenging in that relationship?

Come together as a group:

Offer a prayer together that:

- (i) Gives thanks for the reassuring and precious things; and
- (ii) Seeks help with the challenging things.

Offer this prayer in ways that are appropriate for your group. For some groups, symbols may be helpful.

Part 2: Listening for the Shepherd's voice

Knowing the shepherd and recognising the shepherd's voice are features of sheep that belong to the shepherd's flock. Jesus said those who belong to the shepherd's flock will "listen to my voice" (John 10:16). They will follow that voice alone, and create a healthy bond with their shepherd. Earlier in the same chapter, in John 10:4-5, Jesus describes the scene saying,

"When the shepherd has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."

7. **Discuss together how sheep might learn 'to know the voice' of their shepherd?**

Perhaps, in more familiar images, you could consider how dogs learn to know the voice of their masters or children learn the voice of their parents? In what ways might this inform how we learn to follow the Good Shepherd?

Later in John 10, we discover that Jesus' words were dividing his listeners. Some claimed: 'He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?' (John 10:20). He is further challenged when visiting Jerusalem. It is the time of Hanukkah, the Festival of Dedication. As he walked through Solomon's Colonnade, some surrounded him and asked, "How long are you going to keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly" (John 10:24). In John 10:25-27 Jesus answered,

"I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

8. **Gather in small groups of about three people – giving each person an opportunity to share.**

Consider the challenge of hearing and knowing the voice of the Good Shepherd.

In what ways do you find this an easy thing to do?

In what ways do you find this a difficult thing to do?

CONSIDERING OUR RESPONSE

Part 1: Hearing the voice of the Shepherd takes time

The Psalms testify to the struggle of God's people listening for God's voice. Hearing God's voice is a life-long journey of discovery and uncertainty, of deepening familiarity and surprising truths. It takes time, and is helped by particular skills and practices.

Allocate one or two passages from the list below to each person in the group. Make sure all the passages are allocated.

- Psalm 1:1-3
- Psalm 5:1-3
- Psalm 40:1-3
- Psalm 37:5-7
- Psalm 46:10
- Psalm 100:1-5
- Psalm 95:6-8

9. **Have everyone quietly read their allocated passages. If time permits, additional passages can be read. Share together the following:**

- List what personal qualities or traits the passages suggest are needed in those who seek to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd.**
- Do you agree with the list from the passages? What qualities would you like to add?**
- Give time for group members to consider – what practical commitment(s) can you make towards practicing these qualities in your life?**



Part 2: Hearing the voice of the Shepherd involves the flock

Community is an important arena in which we learn to be sheep of the Good Shepherd. In this sense, we are sheep of “one flock” (John 10:16). We do not simply listen on our own for the familiar voice of our shepherd, but we listen together with others of the flock who have come to know that voice too.

Jesus sought relationships with his followers that reflected the relationship he experienced with God the Father - “I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father” (John 10:14-15). By those trusting relationships he wished to make a life-sustaining community with his sheep, to guide and save them. Through his sheep he hoped to offer that life-giving way to all people.

10. *The early church community, as recorded in Acts 2:42-47, showed the first fruits that Christians developed as a flock. Focusing upon these verses, find the five actions (verbs) that describe their life together. Can you find evidence of those five actions in your church community? How is the modern equivalent of these actions in your community similar or different to that depicted in Acts 2?*

In a rich variety of ways, ‘communal disciplines’ are practiced by today’s Christian communities. These disciplines help God’s people to listen for the voice of the Shepherd as a central characteristic of their life together. Some examples of such disciplines include:

- Engaging with scripture – reading, reflection, study, teaching.
- Praying – in rich variety of ways and contexts, both individually and together.
- Serving our neighbour – being active in loving service in the community.
- Worshipping – gathering regularly as God’s people around Word and Sacrament.

11. *Share together your thoughts on how important you feel these practices are to hearing the voice of the Shepherd. Share what other practices you would add as important.*

**Before you conclude
– space for quiet reflection**

Allow sufficient time for each participant to note down their personal responses to the following questions:

- a. What new insights or encouragements have you gained from this study?
- b. What has challenged you or raised new questions for you?
- c. What personal commitment could you make in response to Christ’s call “Come, follow me”?
- d. Can you identify what practical commitment your group could make to grow as a community that seeks to hear the voice of the Shepherd?

After this time, with participants free to choose to respond, extend an invitation for anyone to share from their responses. It may be particularly helpful for the whole group to note responses relating to question (d).

CLOSING WORSHIP

To prepare for this closing worship, first select:

- (i) someone to read 'I believe I need a shepherd';
- (ii) someone to read the scripture exercise including words for the 'imaginative verse';

Enter this time of closing worship without further announcement. Readers are encouraged to take their time to allow for quiet spaces.

'I believe I need a shepherd' by Bruce D. Prewer, 2002.

I believe I need a shepherd.

Because I am sometimes timid and other
times overconfident,

because I often don't know the best path
yet pretend I do,

because I rush into dead ends or lead others
into hazardous places,

because my brightest ideas are seamed
with darkness,

because the things I crave may not be what
is good for me,

I need a shepherd.

I believe in Jesus, the best possible shepherd;
his wisdom leads me to the best opportunities,
his word comforts me when I'm anxious or afraid,
his arm steadies me when I feel weary and
heavy-laden,
his wounded body displays the cost of my rescue.

I believe in Jesus, the best possible shepherd.
I believe that I do not find him but he finds me,
that I live under his care by virtue of sheer grace,
the love he gives me is to be shared with others,
that he treasures my name and prepares
a place for me,
that his fold transfixes earth and heaven.
I trust Jesus, the good shepherd. Amen.

Scripture - Mark 1:16-17a, 2:14

This is a repeat of the exercise shared in the opening worship. However, this time a third 'imaginative verse' is added.

Have someone in the group slowly read the verses. Repeat the reading after a time of silence lasting a minute or two. In the silence, use your imagination to consider your personal reactions, thoughts and feelings to hearing Jesus' words "Come, follow me".

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me" ...

As Jesus walked along [the lake], he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him.

As Jesus walked along ...

[add the name of the town or street where you are gathered],

he saw this small group ...

[add name(s) that would distinguish your own group]

They gathered to share and learn and grow. Jesus spoke to them: "Come, follow me".

Optional – at the conclusion of the above reading, sing or play a recording of a song for reflection. Draw on contemporary songs or suggestions from *Together in Song* such as:

'The Lord's my Shepherd' (10)

'The King of Love My Shepherd is' (145)

'Master, Speak! Thy Servant Heareth! (597)

Closing prayer (by Rev Jennie Gordon)

Pray together:

We go on,

in the compassionate community of love,

finding wonder and wisdom

in all we encounter,

being bearers of hope, kindness and grace

in the name of Christ,

Amen

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