



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 4 seeking Compassion



Study 4

Seeking Compassion

INTRODUCTION

‘Seeking compassion’ is part of our response to following Jesus Christ, in whom we discern the love and grace of God’s divine compassion for all creation.

We seek compassion as we seek to walk together as First and Second Peoples in this land.

We seek compassion as a community formed by God’s Spirit. We are called to be people who offer compassion to others, responding to human need in our daily encounters with our neighbour. We are also receivers, in our own times of need, of the gift of compassion from another person – friend or stranger.

We seek compassion as a gospel way of striving for justice in our world.

We seek compassion ‘for all creation’ in our stewardship of this planet, in the care for our environment locally and globally.

Please note: As you share in the study exercises, please acknowledge the ‘cost of compassion’ by being sensitive to, and careful with, the pain and struggle of others in your group. At times, sharing in smaller groups of twos or threes may be helpful.

May this study lead your group to a deep encounter with the vision of ‘seeking compassion’.

GATHERING WORSHIP

Before commencing this worship time, gather the three symbols of Bible, candle and water, and allocate readers for various components. Then, allowing time for silence as appropriate, enter into this worship without announcements.

Call to worship

As each symbol is placed before the group, the chosen bearer of the symbol speaks the word of invitation and the group responds in the bold words.

Bible

Lord God, speak words of your compassion into our gathering

That we might be your compassionate people

Candle

Christ Jesus, let your light burn strong throughout our gathering

That we might be your compassionate people

Bowl of water

Holy Spirit, may the waters of your compassion flow from our meeting

That we might be your compassionate people. Amen

Luke 7:11-17

This passage tells the story of a visit of Jesus to a town called Nain. There Jesus encounters a funeral procession for the son of an unnamed widow. It is the meeting of two large crowds, each heading in opposite directions.

Have one person read the passage and imagine the dynamics of the scene. Note how Jesus responds to the scene and, more particularly, to the woman.

Key contributors:

Rev John Clarke, Director of Mission, Uniting (Vic.Tas).

Silent reflection

In a time of silent reflection, consider the story and the four different translations of Luke 7:13 below. Which translation do you prefer? Consider what attracted you to that version.

- 13 And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." (*New Revised Standard Version*)
- 13 When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." (*New International Version*)

13 When the Lord saw her, his heart was filled with pity for her, and he said to her, "Don't cry." (*Good News translation*)

13 When Jesus saw her, his heart broke. He said to her, "Don't cry." (*The Message, Eugene Petersen*)

Give opportunity for group members, if they wish, to briefly comment on their preference and/or any particular aspect of the Luke 7:11-17 story that grabbed their attention.

Prayer

Have one person volunteer to read the following quote from Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Let there be a brief time of silence after the quote is read.

The same is true for our suffers of leprosy,
the same for our crippled,
for our unloved,
for our uncared.
It is the same thing:
they need love, they need compassion,
they need a human touch.
Touch the sufferer of leprosy
with your kindness.

Conclude this opening worship by praying together (leader with group responses in bold) the following prayer by Mother Teresa:

Lord, open our eyes
that we may see you in our brothers and sisters.
Lord, open our ears
**that we may hear the cries of the hungry,
the cold, the frightened, the oppressed.**
Lord, open our hearts
that we may love each other as you love us.
Lord,
renew in us your spirit.
free us and make us one.
In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

EXPLORING THE THEME

Sharing together

In groups of two or three, give each person an opportunity to respond to the following questions:

- a. Have there been times when you have experienced compassion, been welcomed and loved? Describe how you felt at those times?
- b. "Loving the other" is not always easy. Describe a situation where compassion for another person was a struggle or even not possible for you.

Gather your whole group together again. Extend a general invitation for participants to name, as each feels prompted, any broad themes that arose from small group sharing.

God is a compassionate God.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the story of Jonah is well known. The story reaches a climax in Chapter 4 where Jonah cries out in prayerful frustration and anger:

"O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (verse 2).

Jonah desired punishment for Nineveh and did not want to see God offer any opportunity for compassion. Among other lessons, the story of Jonah reminds us how hard it can be for us to respond to others with compassion. God offers a compassionate orientation to each and all. This divine gift of compassion can become a source for all who seek to reflect God's compassion in their life. In his cry, Jonah reflects an oft-repeated description of God's character. Psalm 145:8-9 declares: "The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made." (See other examples such as: Exodus 34:6, Nehemiah 9:17, Psalm 86:15, Psalm 103:8, Joel 2:13.)

But further, and most decisively, people encounter the compassion of God in Jesus Christ. From the paper *Theological reflections on the Vision and Mission Principles* (available at: ucavictas.org.au/visionandmission/resources/) comes the following quote:

"Compassion is the heart of the Incarnation. God saw our helplessness and in compassion sent Christ not to condemn us but to bring us the new life and grace found in God. This is the glue that binds our community together. There are many times in the gospels where Jesus had compassion on people (for example Mark 6:34, Mark 8:2-3, Matthew 9:35-38, Matthew 20:34, Luke 7:13, John 11:34-36). It is at the heart of the nature of community we seek: community in which we can encounter the other and become ourselves irrespective of race, gender, sexual orientation or theological perspective. It is welcoming and loving of the other without putting a price on that welcome and love."

God comes in compassion and in Christ enters into our human experience. Jesus walks in our shoes and journeys toward death on a cross. The compassion of God we have received in Christ becomes our inner source of compassion for others. This divine compassion holds the community of faith with grace, love, and welcoming hospitality.

Sharing together

In what ways might compassion be 'the glue that binds your community together'?

Share briefly your responses to the description of God as a 'compassionate God'.

Does this description sit well with you? Do you live with a sense of God's compassion?

Or does this feel inconsistent with your sense of Godly character?

CONNECTING WITH SCRIPTURE

Jesus shares a parable in Luke 15:11–32. It is a well-known story popularly titled ‘The Parable of the Prodigal Son’. However, this title overlooks two other key characters: the father and the older son/brother.

Read Luke 15:11–32. Since it is so well-known, your group might appreciate reading it in a modern paraphrase such as *The Message*, or your group might also enjoy reading it dramatically with voices of: a narrator, father, younger son and older son.

Discuss together:

1. *Did any aspect of the story surprise you when you heard it this time? Share what stood out for you in the drama.*
2. *Who shows compassion in the story? Why do you think they do this?*
3. *Who doesn't show compassion? Why is that?*

Culturally, commentaries suggest two remarkable things would have startled those who first heard this parable:

- The younger son asks for his inheritance before it was due! He essentially implies to his father, ‘I wish you were dead!’ Despite this, the father grants the younger son his request; and
 - When the younger, wasteful (prodigal) son returns, the father is looking out for his wayward son and, when he sees him coming, runs out to his son! In the culture of Jesus’ time, the elder father would never humiliate himself by running to the younger, undeserving son.
4. *Share together what the group makes of the remarkable capacities of the father portrayed here? How does this compare with the characters of the younger and older brothers?*
 5. *The parable seems to be an unfinished story. The older son is struggling to have compassion and the younger son is simply enjoying the feast he did not deserve. What might the continuing story look like for each of the two sons? Think of a full range of possibilities.*

Breaking open compassion

Stephen Covey, author of the 1998 bestselling book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, tells this story:

... one Sunday morning on a subway in New York. People were sitting quietly – some reading newspapers, some lost in thought, some resting with their eyes closed. It was a calm, peaceful scene.

Then suddenly, a man and his children entered the subway car. The children were so loud and rambunctious that instantly the whole climate changed.

The man sat down next to me and closed his eyes, apparently oblivious to the situation. The children were yelling back and forth, throwing things, even grabbing people’s papers. It was very disturbing. And yet, the man sitting next to me did nothing.

It was difficult not to feel irritated. I could not believe that he could be so insensitive as to let his children run wild like that and do nothing about it, taking no responsibility at all. It was easy to see that everyone else on the subway felt irritated, too. So finally, with what I felt was unusual patience and restraint, I turned to him and said, “Sir, your children are really disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you couldn’t control them a little more?”

The man lifted his gaze as if to come to a consciousness of the situation for the first time and said softly, “Oh, you’re right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don’t know what to think, and I guess they don’t know how to handle it either.”

Can you imagine what I felt at that moment? My paradigm shifted. Suddenly I saw things differently, and because I saw things differently, I thought differently, I felt differently, I behaved differently. My irritation vanished. I didn’t have to worry about controlling my attitude or my behaviour; my heart was filled with the man’s pain. Feelings of sympathy and compassion flowed freely. “Your wife just died? Oh, I’m so sorry! Can you tell me about it? What can I do to help?” Everything changed in an instant.

Stephen R. Covey (1998), *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Simon and Schuster: NY)

6. *While people in the carriage were upset by the father and his unruly children, discuss the dynamic that changed everything for the writer.*

Compassion can break in upon us unexpectedly. Covey suggests that compassion requires a shift in perspective: from self to the other, from individual to communal, from my narrow view to a bigger picture. This can be triggered by a new context, a change of circumstances, a surprising interruption, some new revelation of information, or a crisis (present or remembered). In the Christian tradition, God's Word resolutely breaks into human history with divine compassion to reveal an unequivocal new perspective of grace and hope in God's coming reign.

7. *Have you ever had a moment like this where 'everything changed in an instant'? Can you share something of the experience with your group?*
8. *Can you imagine this sort of 'breaking open' experience happening in the lives of the two brothers in the Luke 15:11-32 parable?*

CONSIDERING OUR RESPONSE

A. Compassion and self-care

Living as a compassionate people, in solidarity with the suffering and struggles of others, not only invites us to change our perspectives, it also is hard. As Jesus vividly modelled, there is a cost to compassion. Henri Nouwen's words capture the difficulties:

**"Compassion asks us to go where it hurts,
to enter into the places of pain,
to share in brokenness, fear, confusion,
and anguish.**

**Compassion challenges us to cry out with
those in misery,
to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep
with those in tears.**

**Compassion requires us to be weak with
the weak,
vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless
with the powerless.**

**Compassion means the full immersion in the
condition of being human"**¹

Sharing together

Share in your group (as each feels able) by discussing the following questions:

Are there limits to our compassion? How do we discern this?

In what ways can God be a source of strength and renewal for living a compassionate life?

In what ways can we look after for ourselves in living as compassionate people?

How can we support one another in this shared ministry of compassion?

Consider one commitment you could make to care for yourself or another person. Note this commitment for recalling in the closing worship.

B. Who do you have compassion for?

**"Compassion is not in the first instance
about solving anything,
rather the gift of compassion is the ability
to enter into solidarity with those who suffer,
and to be their companion"**

Henri Nouwen

Further to this quote from Henri Nouwen, the interplay between compassion and solidarity is similarly described in the following quote from the paper *Theological reflections on the Vision and Mission Principles*.² Have someone in the group read aloud the quote below.

The church's witness lies not in withholding itself from the broken and alienated, but in fellowship with these. In this the body of Christ (Col. 1:18, 24) discovers the nature of its holiness and unity. God in Jesus Christ identifies with the marginalised, poor, and oppressed, and calls his body to respond in compassion to human need. This response is not something to be handed over to institutions, it occurs in like identification with those in need, in feeling the pain with those in pain, and in responding in the hope, joy, and promise of the kingdom. The church is to be a place of healing not injury. The power of God promised to his people lies not in political or economic might.

Brooke Fraser wrote in her 2008 song *Hosanna*:

**"Show me how to love like you have loved me
Break my heart for what breaks yours".**

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¹Henri Nouwen, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*. Donald McNeill & Douglas Morrison (Doubleday: New York, 1982), p.4.

²From *Theological Reflections on the Vision and Mission Principles* April 2016 - available at ucavictas.org.au/visionandmission/resources/

Before you conclude

Take some time to identify a personal commitment in response to this section.

The following questions may help:

How is your heart reaching out compassionately to a particular person, group or situation?

How might you respond?
Can your community help?

Note this commitment for recalling in the closing worship.

CLOSING WORSHIP

Preparation: This closing worship suggests a prayer response that requires access (where possible and practical) to various materials including: paper card, markers, scissors, old magazines and newspapers.

Recall the responsive liturgy from the start of this study. Gather again the three symbols and nominate someone to lead the short liturgy:

Bible

Lord God, speak words of your compassion into our gathering
That we might be your compassionate people

Candle

Christ Jesus, let your light burn strong throughout our gathering
That we might be your compassionate people

Bowl of water

Holy Spirit, may the waters of your compassion flow from our meeting
That we might be your compassionate people. Amen

Use the following group activity to: (i) recall the commitments identified in the section '*Considering our Response*', (ii) create a prayer symbol for your responses, and (iii) offer a prayer response.

- a. Recall the personal commitments you were able to identify for both an act of compassion and a response to the issue of self-care.
- b. Create a prayer symbol that speaks of your commitments:
Draw or cut out a 'heart' or 'teardrop' symbol. Add words or designs.

Or cut out a picture from an available collection of old magazines or newspapers.

- c. Place your symbol centrally within your prayer circle. If you wish, as you place your symbol, you may offer some simple words of prayer for all to hear.

Conclude this time by having a group member lead the following prayer by Jeff Shrowder³:

Caring

God of Hope and Healing,
God of Boundless Power and Immeasurable Love,
you have called us to ministry in your world.

Confront us with those opportunities

for alleviating another's need,
yet keep us open to recognise and accept
the care and nurture extended to us.

Encourage our listening, as well as our doing.

Gracious God,

sharpen our discernment of our own
insufficiency,
as well as the distress of those around us.

Provide us with the energy and compassion
to meet the needy.

Afford us the desire and humility
to seek regular renewal and repair
of our own being,
which you, O Lord, know intimately
and love endlessly.

Amen.

(Optional) Sing together from *Together in Song*
either 'Beauty for brokenness' (TiS 690) or

'Lord, let me see' (TiS 681)

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***

³Jeff Shrowder, *Scattered Seeds: Worship resources for today's church* (Melbourne: Joint Board of Christian Education, 1994), p. 98.



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Following Walking Seeking