

Must have Experience!

Six studies about the experience of Jesus Christ

by

Chris Walker and
Amelia Koh-Butler



THE ELM CENTRE
EDUCATION FOR LIFE AND MINISTRY



Contents

Introduction to Thomas Bandy and the key question that all leaders should be able to answer.
Examples of answers are to be found throughout this booklet.

Study 1. John 9:1-41 A man born blind
is given sight and the truth that Jesus is from God

Study 2. John 4:5-42 The Samaritan woman
is given understanding and testifies to Jesus as the one who brings saving knowledge

Study 3. Luke 24:13-35 The two on the Emmaus road
are given Jesus' presence and understanding and excitedly share it with others

Study 4. Acts 9:1-22 Paul on the Damascus road
is given insight and so his zeal is redirected to proclaim Jesus as Lord

Study 5. Luke 10:1-20 The disciples sent out
are given a role in Jesus' mission and share in Jesus' task of ushering in the kingdom of God

Study 6. Acts 8:26-38 Philip and the eunuch on the Gaza road
He is given understanding and a place in the Christian community and kingdom of God and by implication testifies to this

Format

These studies follow a worship pattern:

Gathering

- covenant, activity and introduction

Encountering and Engaging with the Word

- reading, commentary, application & questions

Empowering to Go into the World

- prayer, ideas for action and further reading

-

Purpose and Use of the Studies

Six studies are offered to build up those who seek to experience and share their experiences of Jesus Christ. Ideally, these sessions should be used in groups to encourage the formation of people as members of the Body of Christ. As people “build one another up in love” they will experience Jesus Christ in new ways. As many communities undertake special times of Bible Study during Lent, these six studies have been tailored for that purpose. If a congregation is only doing studies for four weeks then it is suggested that studies 1,2,5 & 6 be used. Studies 3 & 4 could be done after Lent. However, they could all be done later than Easter if that suited the local context. At the time of writing, we have been shaken by the news of the Asian Tsunami. This has been taken into account amongst the worship and response suggestions.

Introduction

These studies came in response to a series of conferences led by Thomas Bandy held in different states in Australia in 2004. People from across the Uniting Church in Australia and beyond were impressed by what he had to share with us concerning the nature and future of the church.

Thomas Bandy is senior partner with Bill Easum in Easum, Bandy and Associates, a church consulting and futuring firm in the USA. He is also senior editor of Net Results magazine, a church leadership periodical specializing in new ideas for church vitality. Regarded as one of the most insightful thinkers and writers on the church today, Bandy was ordained in the United Methodist Church, USA, over 25 years ago. He served as Director of Congregational Mission and Evangelism for the United Church of Canada for seven years.

We were challenged in particular with what he gave as his key question:

***What is it about my experience of Jesus
that this community cannot live without?***

Bandy claims clergy and core leaders need to be able to answer this question positively if they desire a thriving church. Note that the question focuses on experience over knowledge. People need to have an experience of Jesus in their lives. The risen Jesus has to be real to them; not just a figure from the past. While it is a personal question it has communal implications. If Jesus has made a difference to my life then he can also make a difference to the lives of others and the community. Recognising this can motivate and assist a church to reach out appropriately to the wider community.

This series of six studies picks up on that key question and relates it to the experience of a range of people in the New Testament. The studies show that Bandy's question is one that Biblical figures would have readily answered. We can learn from their experience which continues to be relevant to us and our churches today as we move into the 21st century.

Study 1. John 9:1-41 A man born blind

When participants have had an opportunity to introduce themselves to one another, the following covenant may be discussed, modified (as agreed by the group) and entered into. It should be revisited each week.

Covenant

We commit this time to God,
whom we do not fully know or understand.

We hope for openness to grow
and be transformed in our learning.

We offer our presence to one another,
trusting that this time and presence
will allow relationships to grow
with one another and with God.

We ask God's Spirit to guide our meeting,
that we may treat the words of Scripture and our companions
with respect and compassion.

To achieve this, we will:

- pay close attention to Scripture and focus on Jesus Christ;
- listen with care to the contributions of others;
- work to make contributions that seek divine truth;
- keep confidential what is shared within the group;
- pray for one another; and seek to act upon what we learn.

Gathering Activity

Participants cover their eyes (either with hands or using blindfolds) as they listen to the passage, uncovering their eyes when the man is told to open his. Afterwards, share how this effected the hearing.

LISTEN: John 9:1-41

Considering the passage

When Jesus came across a man born blind, his disciples raised the question of the relationship between suffering and sin, expressing the old theory of a direct relationship between sin and sickness or disability. Jesus denied this and shifted the focus, saying it was an opportunity to see God in action. In healing the man Jesus used spittle. Mark also records Jesus doing this. Saliva was considered to have medicinal value. It opened him to the charge of engaging in magical practice as well as healing on the Sabbath.

There is a deepening knowledge of Jesus as the one who healed him on the part of the blind man. When first questioned by neighbours the man acknowledged he was the blind beggar and simply said it was "the man called Jesus" who healed him. When the Pharisees were brought they claimed Jesus cannot be from God because he did not observe the Sabbath. They imply that even a wonder worker must not be followed if he draws people away from God's commandments. They fail to recognise that God's intention to heal could override the prohibition on work on the Sabbath. Among the crowd there was division because some said that a sinner could not perform such a sign. The man himself showed that he believed Jesus had divine power and called him "a prophet".

Having spoken to his parents, the Pharisees called the man a second time. They displayed a hardening attitude against Jesus. In saying "Give glory to God" they were really wanting him to tell the truth as they saw it, namely that Jesus was a sinner and could not have healed him. The man stood on his experience of Jesus. One thing he did know is that though he was blind now he sees, thanks to Jesus. He became bolder in his reply. The Pharisees accused him of being a disciple of Jesus, claiming to be disciples of Moses. They affirmed God's action in the past with Moses but were not willing to recognise God's present action in Jesus. The man affirmed Jesus is "from God" for apart from God he could not do what he has done.

In the final encounter, as a result of Jesus' questions, the man came to believe in Jesus as "the Son of Man". Jesus then made explicit the contrast between light and darkness, sight and blindness, as shown in this series of encounters.

The experience with Jesus and its implications

The blind man stood firm on his experience of Jesus. One thing he was certain about is though he was blind now he can see. This came about because of Jesus. When challenged about gaining sight through Jesus, the blind man did not doubt his experience or that Jesus is from God for this to have happened. In fact the challenges he had to face meant he affirmed more strongly the truth of his experience and led to a deeper understanding of Jesus. He received sight when he washed in the pool of Siloam. He received progressive insight into Jesus as a result of his encounters with neighbours, Pharisees and finally Jesus himself.

The blind man experienced Jesus as one who reached out to him. In this account it is not the blind man who initiated the contact but Jesus. Jesus had compassion on him and revealed that God is a God who longs to heal. On the other hand, the Pharisees became progressively hardened against Jesus. In doing so, they revealed spiritual blindness and an unwillingness to see God at work in the present through Jesus.

Questions

1. What experience of Jesus can you point to that brought healing or insight to your life?
2. Who in your community would benefit from being open to the experience of Jesus you have had?
3. Who are the Pharisees in your community that want to deny that Jesus can heal and is from God?
4. How do you respond when you feel God is absent, when there is not an experience of Christ?

The blind man's experience of healing led him to affirm Jesus is from God. If the community was to benefit then it also had to be open to God being at work in the present to heal and save. In this, God might use unauthorized and unexpected people. If they are from God, the outcomes of their ministry will be that people experience healing and wholeness. The blind man came to acknowledge that Jesus was not only the man who brought him sight but went on to confess Jesus as the Son of Man. He was open to Jesus and became a believer and disciple whereas the Pharisees, because of their preconceived ideas, were blind to what God wanted to reveal to them, namely that Jesus was indeed his Son. So they missed out on both God's grace and revelation.

The passage shows that experience takes priority over received ideas. The experience with Jesus is the foundation for confession of faith.

Prayers	Ideas for Action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Prayers for one another...</i> - <i>Prayers for healing in Sri Lanka and Southern India...</i> - <i>Pray for Beverly and Trevor Watson working at McLeod Hospital in Jaffna, northern Sri Lanka...</i> <p>Open our eyes, our God, so that we can see you at work in our present context. Open our ears that we might hear your word to us.</p> <p>Let us not be swayed by the negative voices of critics. Enable us to connect our experience of Jesus with the needs of our community and not just keep it to ourselves or within the church family. Through Jesus Christ, the Son of Man and Son of God, we pray. Amen.</p>	<p>The hospitals and schools of our Partner Church, the United Church of Southern India are involved in healing and housing victims of the 2004 boxing Day Tsunami.</p> <p>Send Tax Deductible donations to :</p> <p>UC Overseas Aid - Tsunami Appeal PO Box A2266, Sydney South 1235, NSW Australia.</p> <p>Phone-Donations on 02 8267 4266 or Toll-Free 1800 998 122</p>

Extra reading

An Old Testament story to compare with the one above is that of Elisha and Naaman found in 2 Kings 5:1-19. This could be done as an optional homework activity. If desired by the group, people could comment on what they discovered at the beginning of the next study.

For information on the Uniting Church response to the Asian Tsunami, go to <http://nat.uca.org.au/news/tsunami/nationalresponse.htm>

Study 2. John 4:5-42 The Samaritan woman

Covenant (See Study 1)

Activities – 2 options

A. Read or sing the song "Wellsprings" ("All Together Whatever", Open Book, or "Retrospect" NSW UCA Youth Unit/NCYC)

Wellsprings

CHORUS Like the woman of old, each day - we go to the wellsprings of life to find Jesus there.

1. Some days the well seems dry.
We can't reach the water - it's too hard.
Some days our legs won't take us, our hearts are aching, crying.
2. Some days our minds are reeling.
There's too much happening, we need to stop.
Some days our souls are parched, we need the water - so thirsty.
3. Some days there's no escape life's routine and madness.
Some days we don't want to go - we can't see the rhyme or reason.
4. Some days we're resurrected, we feel new life - inside us.
Some days our faith moves mountains,
we feel life's glory - earth and heaven. © Don Stewart 1995

B. One or two people might share about their experiences of practicing daily devotions. This might be a good opportunity to show people a copy of "With Love to the World" <http://wlw.uca.org.au/>

**Contact: The Secretary, With Love to the World,
62 The Boulevard, Strathfield, NSW 2135;
Ph 02 9747 1369, Fax 02 9715 7045, email
wlwdbrg@bigpond.com**

Place a jug of water in front of the group
and Read John 4:5-42
At the end of the reading,
each participant is served with a glass of water.

Considering the passage

Jesus came near to the small Samaritan town of Sychar, a small place, but known for having a well that Jacob had dug. It was at the foot of Mt Gerizim.

About noon, not the time when people usually came to draw water from the well, a Samaritan woman came. Jesus started a conversation with her, surprising her given the tension between Jews and Samaritans. The reasons for this went back a long way. Samaritans were a remnant of the northern kingdom who had mixed blood and so were not regarded as true Jews. They refused to worship at Jerusalem. At the time of the restoration of Jerusalem after the exile they were obstructionist. They even helped Syrian monarchs in wars against Jews. For their part in 128 BC the Jewish high priest burned the Samaritan temple on Mt Gerizim. Jews regarded Samaritans as ritually impure. So Jesus consciously went against strong convention in talking to this Samaritan woman.

He turned the conversation from water to living water. What did he mean by this? Scholars suggest two possibilities that are both appropriate. One is that he was referring to the revelation he brings. The second is that he was offering the Spirit. The living water has to do with the truth and grace he could provide from God. She referred to Jesus as "Sir", using this expression with increasing respect as the conversation progressed. In a typically ironic expression from John's gospel, she asked, "Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob who gave us the well?"

Jesus then turned the conversation to her personal life and showed he knew she was a person with a series of intimate relationships. Jews allowed only three marriages, so if Samaritans did the same she led a markedly immoral life. Yet Jesus did not speak in a condemnatory way. She acknowledged her experience and said, "I see you are a prophet." Other men had known her physically, Jesus showed he knew her in a different way and offered her something no-one else could.

She then changed the topic of conversation to worship. Jesus replied that the place of worship is of less importance than how we worship. In order to worship God as Father we need the Spirit who enables us to be God's children. Elsewhere Paul also says this. God gives the Spirit so people can worship and live in spirit and truth.

The Samaritans did not expect a Davidic Messiah, but a prophet like Moses who was a leader, teacher and lawgiver. The woman expressed hope for such a Messiah. Unlike his reluctance in the other gospels, surprisingly Jesus identified himself with the one she hoped for. Possibly he did so because the Samaritan Messianic hopes were not nationalistic and militaristic but recognised the Messiah's primary teaching role.

When the woman went back to the town she wanted others to encounter Jesus. Her haste was a little like that of the two on the road to Emmaus after they recognised Jesus.

When the disciples returned, their conversation with Jesus had similarities with that of the woman. They thought in terms of earthly food. Jesus told them he was sustained by spiritual food which was to do the will of God and complete his work. He drew on known sayings to point out that both sowing and reaping, proclaiming faith and seeing people become disciples, are important.

The conclusion has many Samaritans coming to see Jesus. Some had believed on account of the woman's experience with Jesus which she shared. After Jesus agreed to stay for two more days there, many Samaritans came to believe in Jesus. They now did not just have the woman's experience to look to but also had their own. They came to affirm Jesus as the Saviour of the world, using a term they were familiar with. He brought saving knowledge.

The experience with Jesus and its implications

The woman encountered Jesus at the well and was led into a profound conversation. Her experience resulted in her coming to a deepening understanding of Jesus. On returning to her townsfolk she said, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!" Not only that, she now thought he could be the Messiah.

As the conversation with Jesus progressed, she became increasingly impressed with him. In a similar way to the blind man, she moved from regarding him as a Jewish man, to calling him a prophet, to considering him to be the Messiah.

She experienced Jesus as one with knowledge and wisdom. He knew her history and openly stated it, yet was not condemnatory. He spoke of living water and the need for God's Spirit to worship God the Father as he wants. In this Jesus displayed the characteristics of the hoped for Messiah for the Samaritans.

The disciples too experienced Jesus as one who said he was spiritually nourished by God. They were called by Jesus to participate in his mission. The woman readily shared her experience with Jesus with her townsfolk. In hearing Jesus for themselves they came to their own experience of Jesus beyond the testimony of the woman. So they too could affirm Jesus as Saviour.

This passage highlights that experience is the basis for testimony. People cannot deny a person's experience and this can lead to wanting to find out more for themselves.

Questions

1. Do you experience Jesus as one who knows you better than anyone else?
2. Does he provide spiritual resources for you? In what ways?
3. Who in your community would benefit from the truth and spirit Jesus offers?
4. Are there times when you do not experience Jesus as one who really understands you and does not provide the help you want?
5. How do you respond to these times?

My Experience of Jesus that this Community cannot live without...

It is being close to God that thrills me about following Jesus. There are extreme moments, intense experiences, boring blanks, but mostly an abiding and steady intimacy does not depart me. I need that to live a Christian life with enough strength of mind and will.

To serve the ungrateful, to advocate among enemies, to lead the neurotically self-interested - it would have killed me long ago but for being in Jesus. I don't have the words to say it adequately, and it probably sounds too pious, but it is my honest experience.

I am so blessed.

- Ian Robinson

Prayer

- *Prayers for one another...*
- *Prayers for individuals and communities struggling in drought areas of NSW-ACT ...*
- *Prayers for those trying to provide safe drinking water in areas trying to rebuild following human conflicts and natural disasters...*
- *Give thanks for the refreshment and joy that comes when we take time to drink of the Living Water in study and worship.*

Father/Mother God,
only you really understand me fully.
Help me, through Jesus,
to understand myself better.
Grant me the truth and grace
to live as you want.
Give me your Spirit
to live as your child.
Enable me so to experience and
know this that I will readily
share my faith with others.
In the name and Spirit of Jesus,
your Son, I pray. Amen.

Ideas for Action

Is your church water-wise?

What can you do to encourage responsible water-usage at church properties and in members' homes/workplaces?

If your congregation has links with another, perhaps you could share some "water-stories"...

Is your region on water restrictions?

How does this effect life in your region?

Some city and country congregations share their experiences with Jesus Christ by "twin-ning".

Contact: Wendy White at the Board of Mission
bomrural@bigpond.net.au

Extra reading

A very different Old Testament story is that of Elijah on Mount Sinai found in 1 Kings 19:1-16.

What experience and understanding of God was he given?

Note his depression and the important task God gave him at the end of the account.

*My Experience of Jesus
that this Community cannot live without...*

My initial experience of a Walk to Emmaus weekend was of a pleasant Christian Camp/Retreat. It was a weekend full of friendship, singing and learning. I learnt a lot about other people's experiences of Jesus Christ. They knew him a bit differently from me, and that sparked my curiosity.

Over the next 10 years, as I became more deeply involved with the Walk to Emmaus Movement, I discovered that Walking in the company of Jesus must necessarily involve journeying with other people - the corporate Body of Christ – the Church.

Over the years, this has led to an increased involvement in Church Community as I seek further experiences of Jesus Christ and also to share these experiences with others.

Through Jesus and in the Church, I have found love and relationships, a new identity and family. - Amelia Koh-Butler

“Jesus and the Disciples at Emmaus”

Hari Santosa – Indonesia

Permission/Sourced from Asian Christian Art Association.



Study 3. Luke 24:13-35 On the Emmaus road

Covenant (See Study 1)

Activity

If there is someone in the group who has been on a “Walk to Emmaus” Weekend, ask them to share briefly about their experience. Alternately, ask someone from the Regional Emmaus Community to come and share something about their activities. The “Walk to Emmaus Movement” is an Ecumenical activity, sponsored in Australia by the Uniting Church. <http://www.emmaus.org.au/>

Share bread and dips among the group. Experience the difference in the communal spirit as hospitality is shared.

Read Luke 24:13-35

Reflect on the picture and story from the previous page...

Considering the passage

The two were disciples of Jesus but not apostles. While we usually assume they were male, it is possible that the second person was a female, Cleopas' wife for example. The journey provided time to think about all that had happened. When the stranger joined them they failed to recognise him. This is not too surprising as they did not expect this possibility. It was safer for an individual to walk with others. This is similar to the experience recorded in John 21 about the seven disciples who went fishing. The stranger on the shore turned out to be Jesus

They indicated they were somewhat offended when the stranger asked what they were talking about. In responding they showed that they had fixed religious and political expectations. They hoped Jesus would deliver Israel from her enemies bringing religious and political freedom. They went on to speak about the tomb being found empty, but this alone, while raising questions, did not engender faith.

The stranger then pointed out that that the suffering of the Messiah before entering his glory was part of God's overall will, not a contradiction of it. Suffering preceded exaltation. Luke does not give the specifics, but does say Jesus drew on each part of the Hebrew scriptures: the books of Moses, the prophets and the writings. In Acts

chapter 8 Philip explained the scriptures to the Ethiopian official which led him to become a follower of Jesus.

When they arrived at the village they invited the stranger to stay for a meal. This was typical Eastern hospitality. At the meal the guest became the host and broke the bread, no doubt in a characteristic way that enabled them to recognise it was Jesus. So Jesus came to them in both the word and in fellowship at the table. Then he disappeared from their sight. The surprising thing was not the disappearance but that he appeared to them on the road.

Retrospectively they realised that their hearts were burning within them while he shared with them. They immediately went back to Jerusalem to tell the other disciples of their experience. In doing so Luke has conflated two traditions for they say, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon". Paul's list of resurrection appearances in 1 Corinthians 15 also refers to Peter's experience.

The experience with Jesus and its implications

The two on the road to Emmaus did not expect to see Jesus again. In order to do so they had to lose their illusions. Their hopes for Jesus were mistaken. The triumph of the Jewish and Roman authorities in getting rid of Jesus was obvious to them. Jesus joined them on the road and brought new understanding. Their experience of Jesus came as he explained the scriptures and then broke bread with them. They had to understand that suffering was not failure, but part of God's loving will, identifying with hurting and sinful humanity. Only after being obedient to the point of death on the cross was Jesus raised into God's glory.

Jesus joined them unannounced and enabled them to experience him even before they recognised who he was. There was no supernatural splendour, though it was the risen Jesus allowing them to benefit from his words and presence once more.

Often it is not till after the event that we recognise its significance. The two realised that as Jesus interpreted the recent devastating events in the light of scripture, their faith and hope was rekindled. So then they excitedly hurried back to Jerusalem to share their story with the other disciples. Their experience was not one to be kept to themselves, even overnight. They wanted to tell the others straight away.

Luke's joining of two traditions shows that while it is important to share one's own experience it can also correlate with that of others. This strengthens conviction for it is not just one or two person's experience.

Questions

1. Have you had an experience of the risen Jesus that you only recognized later?
2. How did you recognize Jesus? Was it through scripture, or a time when you sensed him present in worship, or in some other setting?
3. Did you readily share your experience with others or were you unsure of whether to tell others?
4. How did you think they might respond?
5. How might others benefit from your experience? Could it encourage others' faith and hope or challenge their preconceived ideas?
6. What happens when your hopes are disappointed and you do not sense Jesus' presence?
7. Where are you along this road: still downcast and perplexed, reflecting and listening, moved by scripture, eyes opened, excited by a new experience of the risen lord and wanting to share it with others?

Your Spiritual Companions

List some of the people who have "held the Christ-light" for you...

Prayer

- *Prayers for one another...*
- *Prayers for Mission and Ministry Teams, especially those that sacrifice personal comforts and desires for the sake of serving and sharing experiences of God with others...*
- *Pray for those hungry for bread and rice*
- *Give thanks for spiritual companions...*

Loving God,
help us to recognise you are with us even when we do not feel it or expect it.
Jesus, may you come to us unannounced as living comforter, guide and friend as we consider the scriptures, spend time in prayer, share with other Christians and in the journey of our lives.
Through your Spirit
may we experience renewed faith and hope and look for opportunities to share this with others.
Enable us to do so both within the Christian community and in the wider community that so often lacks trust and hopefulness.
As disciples of Jesus we pray. Amen

Ideas for Action

- Send a thank you note to someone who inspires you.
- Fasting... Sacrifice (give up) something over coming days and give its equivalent value towards a pastoral care or recovery activity. Giving up your own comfort may bring God's comfort to another.
- Share in someone's suffering by simply listening to their story or visiting them.
- Support
UnitingCare's
Hospital Chaplains.

Extra reading

We generally think of experiences of God as comforting and personal. In the Old Testament God was often experienced as calling the person to say or do uncomfortable things. Consider the call of Samuel under Eli in 1 Samuel 3:1-21. What does this suggest about genuine experiences of God?

Some ideas for Holy Week Reflections

For each reflection, a member of the group might prepare one of the following:

- A monologue, spoken in the character of the passage;
- A personal story about the experience of Jesus;
- A poem or artwork inspired by the passage;
- A newspaper article, based on the story.

For each reflection, a verse or verses from the passage are suggested for further meditation.

- Read the words slowly aloud.
- Allow a time of contemplation, perhaps with some background music or provide blank paper and pencils or pastels.
- Re-read the words.

John 9:1-41 A man born blind

Focus: Verses 5, 33, 39

John 4:5-42 The Samaritan woman

Focus: Verses 19, 32, 38

Luke 24:13-35 The two on the Emmaus road

Focus: Verses 21, 26, 35

Acts 9:1-22 Paul on the Damascus road

Focus: Verses 7 and 20

Luke 10:1-20 The disciples sent out

Focus: Verses 3 and 20

Acts 8:26-38 Philip and the eunuch on the Gaza road

Focus: Verse 34

Bible Study participants wish to share something about the impact that these verses have had over the last few weeks.

How are people's experiences of Jesus developing?

***My Experience of Jesus
that this Community cannot live without...***

Love and Affirmation through authentic hospitality... For two weeks (during about FACE), I lived in an Aboriginal community where hospitality was a way of life. The word "hospitality" sometimes conjures up an image of easy living – where everything is provided and done for you. I'm not talking about that kind of hospitality, but hospitality grown from acceptance.

In the Port Augusta (South Australia) Congress Community, "who I am" was affirmed and welcomed – the gifts of everyone were given space. This experience of Jesus continues to affect the way I relate to people now. It gave me a glimpse of the Kingdom of God and renewed hope in the concept of community.

Maybe it can be created where I live, too!

*- Steph Gesling
Info about About Face...<http://aboutface.unitingchurch.org.au/about/>*

***My Experience of Jesus
that this Community cannot live without...***

The proof of two of Jesus promises:

*'I am with you always' 'My peace I leave with you'
I had borrowed and spent a lot of money putting the crop in and it looked fantastic. It started to rain. It rained and rained. I burnt some of that crop in February because it was too rotten to harvest. During this 4 months I cried, I prayed I was angry at God, I had had 3 years of drought and this crop was going to save us financially. I felt peace as I began making each decision of 'what now'. I felt guided as a final decision was made to leave farming. I asked God to confirm this decision. Answers and miraculous opportunities began to appear. The decisions were scary. I had a young family to support. I was able to feel a reassurance and a peace about our future all I had to do was to trust Jesus and step out in faith. I did and I know those two promises are true. I felt Jesus was with me and I had peace.
God has changed my life direction 5 times dramatically and this was only one of those times. It has never been easy but it has been possible because I now know these promises are true..
Ross Neville*

Study 4. Acts 9:1-22 Paul on the Damascus road

Covenant (See Study 1)

Activity

Dramatic Reading	Acts 9:1-22
Cast:	Narrator, Saul, Voice, Companions 1 & 2, Ananias

Prior to reading, allow the cast time to read through quietly, to really get the feel for the flow of the story.

- Narr: Saul, breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest...
- Saul: Give me letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if I find any who belonged to the Way, men or women, I may bring them bound to Jerusalem.
- Narr: Now as he was going along with his companions and approaching Damascus, a light from heaven suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground.
- Voice: Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?
- Saul: Who are you, Lord?
- Voice: I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up, enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.
- C 1: When we saw what happened, we stood speechless because we heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he was blind!
- C 2: We led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and he did not eat nor drink.
- Narr: There was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision,
- Voice: Ananias.
- Ananias: Here I am, Lord.
- Voice: Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay hands on him so that he might regain his sight.
- Ananias: Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has been given authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.

Voice: Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.

Narr: So Ananias entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul saying,

Ananias: Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Narr: Immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he could see. Then he got up and was baptised, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus, and he started to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues.

Saul: He is the Son of God.

C 1: All of us who heard him were amazed.

C 2: Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem among those who invoked this name? And has he not come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?

Narr: Saul became increasingly more powerful and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Messiah.



Ask each of the readers to share how they think their character felt. Were there any changes or surprises as the reading went on?

Ideas for Action

Colouring-in pictures of Bible Stories are available at <http://www.iscoq.org/cc/coloring/> Share them with your children!

Considering the passage

Luke regarded the conversion of Saul of Tarsus as a pivotal event, so much so that he gives us three slightly different versions. As well as here, there are accounts in Acts 22:4-16 and 26:9-18. Saul's conversion was not without preparation. This is hinted at in the third version when the risen Jesus not only says, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" but also "It hurts you to kick against the goads." He had witnessed the stoning of Stephen and the persistence of his victims in their faith in Jesus. No doubt these made an impression on him.

The expression "the Way" was an early designation for Christianity. It describes the Christian faith as a way of life not just a set of beliefs.

The divine realm is often depicted as light. Here we are told of a light from heaven and a voice. The voice was that of the risen Jesus. Persecuting the disciples of Jesus amounted to persecuting Jesus himself. Elsewhere Luke presents Jesus as saying, "Whoever listens to you listens to me, and who ever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me" (Luke 10:16).

There are minor variations as to what the companions of Saul experienced. Primarily it was an experience of Saul, but the others are presented as being witnesses to the event. Luke in Acts gives us the externals of the conversion. Paul himself focused on the inward character of the experience as being primary. The main elements are that Christ appeared to him (1 Cor.15:8-11) and that God, not humans, called him to preach to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:16).

The Lord spoke to Ananias in a vision. He was told to go to the street called Straight. This was a main east-west street in ancient and modern Damascus. Despite his understandable reluctance given Saul's reputation, he was told Saul will be a chosen instrument to bring the Lord's name to Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel. So Ananias went, laid hands on him and addressed him as "Brother". His willingness to do so in obedience to God was impressive.

Symbolic language was used to describe Saul's restoration to sight. Something like scales fell from his eyes. Also, in saying he received the Holy Spirit and was baptised, Luke has Saul incorporated into the church. He then presented him as eager to proclaim Jesus publicly.

The experience with Jesus and its implications

Saul regarded the followers of the Way of Jesus Christ as heretics, as those who were diverting people from the true way of Israel. As such they were not just mistaken but dangerous heretics. They were undermining Judaism. Hence he felt justified in trying to destroy them. Yet there must have been some unease in witnessing the faith of those he was persecuting. Witness to the point of sacrifice does have an unsettling effect on others.

The experience on the road to Damascus was an experience that utterly transformed Saul's zeal for the faith of his people. It was an experience not just of God but of Jesus as risen Lord. Jesus so identified with his followers that persecuting them amounted to persecuting Jesus himself. This was a blinding revelation and word from God. He was made to recognise that instead of serving God he had been opposing God. Jesus was not a dangerous heretic but indeed God's Son.

The experience had such an impact on him that he was unable to see for three days. To see again required the touch of Ananias, one of the leaders of the believers in Damascus. Ananias represented the willingness of the followers of Jesus to risk accepting Saul into their fellowship. Churches need to display that kind of acceptance. So Saul became one of the disciples of Jesus. He reflected on the implications of this experience with Jesus more deeply than anyone else as we see in all his letters.

This memorable call from God was not just for Paul's own conversion but in order that his zeal, intellect and qualities could be utilized to further the Christian cause. Paul himself did not dwell on the externals of the experience as such but was willing to say that God's grace was not given in vain. He worked harder than any of the other apostles (1 Corinthians 15:10). The privilege of experiencing God's revealing and transforming grace brought with it the responsibility to serve Christ which Paul did without reserve.

In our context we often have to deal with lack of zeal or scepticism regarding faith. Yet people do have passionate interests. God wants to provide us with experiences of grace that redirect our passions in order to use them to further his loving and just purposes.

Questions

1. What people of faith made a significant impression on you?
2. Have you had a dramatic Damascus road experience that led to faith in Jesus?
3. Was your experience more like the two on the road to Emmaus who already knew Jesus but had their faith lit in a new way?
4. Do you feel you have not had any memorable experiences of Jesus? What matters is less the nature of the experience itself so much as what it has led to in your life.
5. How has the Christian community received you?
6. How has your experience, along with your gifts and talents, been used to serve God's mission in the world?

Prayer

- Prayers for one another...
- Prayers for those who bring healing at risk to themselves - especially aid and relief workers and those who risk persecution for their faith...
- Give thanks for communities of nurture...
Come Lord Jesus, send us your Spirit that we might know you and serve you.
Take our passions, our intellect, our hearts, our hands and use them to further your loving purposes.
May we not be envious of other's experiences but recognise how you have been with us in our lives.
Help us to live by and share our faith with others in such a way that they will want to consider Jesus for themselves.
This we pray in the name of Jesus, the risen lord. Amen

Idea for Action

Invite Community Groups to share their needs and concerns, to be used as the basis for Prayers in Special Services. Ask them to loan banners for those services.

Extra reading

Sometimes we fail to recognize God's presence. e.g. Jacob's experience at Bethel. Read Genesis 28:10-22. Reflect on what this ancient story tells us about God's promises and appropriate responses to experiences of God.

My experience of Jesus that this community cannot live without

My experience of Jesus was that I grew up in a Christian home in which both my father and mother were examples of people of deep faith. My father was known for his outspoken approach as a high profile minister. He displayed a willingness to speak publicly on a range of social issues as well as being an evangelical preacher and concerned pastor. My mother was a very supportive and compassionate person.

Unlike some children of the manse, I did not go through a rebellious period. Being good at both sport and studies meant I developed my own reputation rather than being known primarily as the son of a minister. Nevertheless, it was when I studied at The University of Sydney and was confronted by those who criticized Christianity openly that I was led to really consider my own faith. The university critics focused on the failures of the church or the mistaken approaches of missionaries. They seemed to me to miss the main point which is that faith is first of all in Jesus himself. Whatever the failings of the church and its representatives, Jesus was and is the one to whom I looked. One of the first times I preached was on the text from John's gospel after Jesus gave some difficult teaching. Many disciples turned from him. Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Peter answered, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:66-68 NRSV). Jesus was the one to whom to go for eternal life which I took to be a quality of life now and secondarily as the promise of life after death.

So for me the experience of Jesus was of one who brought life, new life, meaningful life, to people. This was a quality of life with God that is not found elsewhere. If people would only recognize it, this is what the community really needs. My experience of Jesus was that he did provide guidance as to what mattered in life. By following him I would gain a quality of life that was worthwhile and not superficial or simply a reflection of the culture. He provides hope for the present and for the ultimate future. Others in the community would benefit if they realised what Jesus was really about and were not misled by consumer, secular culture or distracted by the mistakes of the church. Jesus is the one to bring "life in all its fullness" (John 10:10 GNB). The community needs to experience Jesus and the grace and truth he brings if it is to be the kind of community, characterised by compassion and justice, that at its best it wants. – Chris Walker

Study 5. Luke 10:1-20 The Disciples sent out

Covenant (See Study 1)

Activity

Choose 2 of the responses to the question:
*What is it about your experience of Jesus Christ
that this community cannot live without?*
Read them aloud and then follow by reading, Luke 10:1-20

Considering the passage

The seventy, or seventy two depending on the manuscript, were appointed by Jesus both to engage in mission and to announce that he was coming. They were not more than representatives of Jesus. Nevertheless they did carry his authority. Paul on the Damascus road was confronted by the risen Jesus with the question, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" when he was persecuting the disciples of Jesus. The number seventy is significant as it was the number of the nations according to Genesis 10 and the rabbis. So Luke here is prefiguring the mission to the Gentiles and indicating that the Christian mission is to all nations. At the end of Matthew's gospel the risen Jesus says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations."

The harvest is God's harvest. They are to go like innocent lambs into a dangerous world of wolves. The task is urgent so they are not to take anything more than that which is absolutely necessary. They are not to delay and are told not to greet anyone on the road for Eastern customs were such that this could take time. They are to pronounce peace on houses where they might stay. Luke highlights the need for such missionaries to accept the hospitality offered them, for they have the right to be provided for, but there is also the warning against moving from one house into another with more comfortable quarters.

They are to be concerned about the physical and spiritual well being of the towns to which they go, and so are to heal the sick and announce the kingdom of God. If the town they enter rejects them they are to carry out a prophetic sign and word of warning. Such prophetic signs were not angry gestures but calls to repentance.

In a separate statement Jesus turned to the towns that represented the key locations of his ministry and pronounced judgment on them. Luke

probably includes this here to prepare the missionaries for the times of failure and rejection.

The return of the seventy is described as joyful. They experienced the reality of God's power such that even the demons submitted to them. They did so because of the authority of Jesus' name. Jesus spoke of having a vision of Satan's power being broken. The disciples have authority over all the forces of evil. What they should really rejoice in, however, is not this so much as having their names written in heaven.

The experience of Jesus and its implications

The disciples had experienced Jesus' ministry. They had witnessed him healing people, casting out demons, teaching and preaching. His ministry had impacted their own lives. Here in Luke, Jesus sent out not just the twelve but a larger group to engage in missionary field experience. This prefigures what will come later when the gospel is to be taken to all nations.

Specific instructions were given. It is important that missionaries focus on the task and not become sidetracked by secondary concerns or seeking their own comfort. They went out two by two which meant mutual support, avoided self aggrandizement and showed they were still learners. They were to represent Jesus and be agents of the coming kingdom of God.

On returning they were flushed with success. Their experience, which no doubt began with some uncertainty, was that they could do what Jesus did and even the demons submitted to them. They did so not in their own authority but in the name of Jesus. When called upon in faith, Jesus' power to overcome evil was demonstrated in their ministry.

Jesus affirmed that they had authority over the forces of evil but pointed out that success was less important than doing God's will whatever the result. Having their names acknowledged in heaven was reason for rejoicing. It was a warning against putting too much value on particular experiences. Experiencing success or failure was not the primary consideration. What really mattered was carrying out God's will, whether the people were receptive or not, and having one's name recorded in heaven.

The personal experience of Jesus' ministry was fundamental. This was required before being commissioned by Jesus to engage in his mission. They then experienced others being healed, delivered and entering the kingdom through their delegated ministry. The mission is God's, yet the disciples were privileged to be given a role in Jesus' mission and called to share in his task of ushering in the reign of God. It is a joy not only to experience Jesus but to be an instrument of God enabling others to experience Jesus also. God records the names of such people.

Questions

1. In what ways have you experienced Jesus' healing, freeing and teaching ministry? How has it impacted your life?
2. How have you responded to the call to ministry and mission?
3. Do you feel you are appropriately using your experiences, skills and gifts?
4. In what ways can the church better utilize people who have experienced Jesus and are ready to serve him?
5. If you have not experienced Jesus' ministry in your life or felt his call, what do you think would assist you to be able to do so?

Prayer

- *Prayers for one another...*
- *Prayers for those who bring healing at risk to themselves - especially aid and relief workers and those who risk persecution for their faith...*
- *Give thanks for communities of nurture, particularly for your congregation or faith community...*
Creating and saving God,
 thank you for giving me not just life but new life in Christ.
May I not keep this experience of Jesus to myself
 but be open to your calling and sending.
Use me to touch other people's lives,
 through my words and actions.
May I be a channel of your grace and peace.
This I pray in the Spirit of Jesus our Lord. Amen

Extra reading

In the Old Testament we read of prophets who were both willing and unwilling to respond to God's call to speak for him.

Compare and contrast the call of Isaiah and Jeremiah in Isaiah 6:1-8 and Jeremiah 1:1-10.

Ideas for Action

Discover some of the stories about Mission Partnerships today at <http://www.uim.uca.org.au/uim.html>

Countries in which we have Partner Churches include:

ASIA	PACIFIC	AFRICA
East Timor	Cook Islands	Mozambique
India	Fiji	South Africa
Indonesia	Kiribati	Tanzania
Malaysia	Nauru	Zambia
Myanmar [Burma]	New Caledonia	Zimbabwe
Philippines	Papua New Guinea	
South Korea	Samoa	
Sri Lanka	Solomon Islands	
Taiwan	Tonga	
Thailand	Tuvalu	
	Vanuatu	

People in Mission provides an opportunity for Christians aged 18 or more to be immersed in the life and mission of our Partner Churches and church agencies in many parts of the world.

Through the experience, participants will learn more about cultures and faiths, including their own.

This includes: Volunteers in Mission; Assisted Volunteers; Mission Co-workers; Associates in Mission; Short Term Mission Experiences; Exposure Visits and Work Parties; and Short term intentional Placements.

Study 6. Acts 8:26-38 Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch on the Gaza road

Covenant (See Study 1)

Activity

Take a blank sheet of paper and try to draw the font, river, beach, pool or baptistery where people from your congregation or faith community get baptised.

Listen: Acts 8:26-38

Considering the passage

An angel is a heavenly messenger. The angel performs the same guiding role as the Spirit in verse 29. Gaza was the ancient southern most city of the Philistines south west of Jerusalem on the route to Egypt. The road referred to is said to be either a road that is no longer used or is a desert road.

The Ethiopian was a Nubian from an area south of Egypt. He was an important official in charge of the treasury of the queen of the Ethiopians, the Candice (a title not a name). He was a proselyte who had been to Jerusalem to worship even though as a eunuch he could not be admitted to the Jewish congregation. The first Gentile convert, according to Luke, was Cornelius (Acts 10:44-48). Philip's mission to this Ethiopian eunuch prepared the way for the Gentile mission, for the Ethiopian was obviously a non Jew.

Under the guidance of the Spirit, Philip ran up to the Ethiopian's chariot or carriage. Philip heard the eunuch reading one of the prophetic books, the book of Isaiah. In the ancient world reading was customarily done aloud. The text was Isaiah 53:7-8, one of the servant passages. Christians interpreted the meaning of Christ out of Old Testament expectations, such as the servant passages of Isaiah. Jesus himself may well have done so. Luke here emphasizes that Old Testament expectations have been fulfilled in the suffering and resurrection of Jesus. The lamb which is silent refers to the silence of Jesus at his trial. The denial of justice relates to the unjust execution of Jesus. The statement that "his life is taken away from the earth" (NRSV) was interpreted to mean he was raised to heaven by his resurrection, ascension and exaltation.

Philip proclaimed the good news about Jesus. This apparently included a call to repentance and faith signified by baptism. Peter's Pentecost sermon had this outcome (Acts 2:37-38). Similarly the eunuch was impressed by the Jewish faith, leading to the point of conversion. On coming upon some water the Ethiopian asked to be baptised which Philip performed.

The experience of Jesus and its implications

The Ethiopian experienced Jesus through Philip's explanation of the scriptures and proclamation of Jesus. He was already a seeker as evidenced by his going to the Jerusalem temple to worship. He sought a deeper understanding of God and the scriptures which Philip was able to provide.

Philip was responsive to the guidance of God's messenger and Spirit. He experienced the leading of God to this significant Ethiopian official and was able to witness to Jesus as a result. He not only spoke about Jesus but must have done so in a way that enabled the Spirit to use his witness to lead the Ethiopian to the point of conversion.

Philip was also willing to be flexible when the Ethiopian asked to be baptised. The circumstance was unusual in that there was no Christian community present and the Ethiopian was heading south. Nevertheless, Philip recognized the desirability of acceding to the eunuch's request for baptism thus enabling him to feel he had a place in the Christian community and the reign of God. For a eunuch, who was often excluded from religious participation because of his condition, such an act of acceptance most likely meant a great deal. The implication is that he would have testified to being a follower of Jesus to those to whom he was returning.

Jesus is experienced through his followers' words and actions. Here Philip was able to be a means by which the Ethiopian was converted and symbolically accepted into the community of all those who profess Jesus is lord.

Questions

1. How was the experience of Jesus mediated to you?
2. What mentor or significant people assisted you to become a follower of Jesus?
3. Are you a mentor to others? Could you be? How might this happen?
4. If you have not committed your life to Jesus, what would it take to do so?
5. What does your baptism mean to you today? If you have not been baptised, what difference do you think it might make?
6. When others are baptized, what effect does that have on you?
7. How can baptisms be utilised to connect with the wider community?

Prayer

- *Prayers for one another...*
- *Pray for community leaders and politicians...*
- *Pray that your community may share hope...*

God of the past,
 God of the present
 and God of the future,
 may we be conscious
 of your steadfast love for us.
 We thank you that you accept us as we are,
 no matter who we are or what our
 circumstances.
 Help us to be open to the leading of your
 Spirit and responsive to the needs of people
 and their situation.
 May we witness to our experience of your
 faithfulness and self giving love when
 opportunities arise.
 This we pray in the name of Jesus,
 the crucified and risen lord. Amen

Extra reading

Read
 Ruth 1:1-18.
 Despite being a
 foreigner, Ruth
 showed
 exceptional
 loyalty to her
 mother-in-law
 and to the God of
 Israel. In the end
 she married Boaz
 and through this
 second marriage
 became the
 great-
 grandmother of
 David.
 What does this
 say to us about
 the importance of
 being faithful to
 the God of Jesus
 Christ?

About the Authors

Rev. Dr. Christopher Walker is a minister of the Uniting Church in Australia. He has degrees from The University of Sydney, Garrett Theological Seminary and Claremont Graduate School in the United States. He has ministered in congregations in New South Wales, served as a consultant for the Synod of Queensland, was principal of Parkin-Wesley College in South Australia and is now mission consultant for the Parramatta-Nepean Presbytery in New South Wales. He has written three books: *Connecting with the Spirit of Christ*, *Jesus Christ more than a man* and *Seeking Relevant Churches for the 21st Century*. Christopher is married to Dell and they have two young adult children, Ben and Heather.

Amelia Koh-Butler is an Accredited Youth Worker of the Uniting Church and currently serves as the Associate Director (Education for Mission) of the ELM Centre in the NSW-ACT Synod. In that capacity, she works across the Synod to develop leadership skills and ministry practice. She has studied at NSW Conservatorium, Wollongong University, Paris Conservatoire, Clare College (Cambridge), United Theological College and Charles Sturt University. She has lectured at NSW Conservatorium, Sydney University and Wesley Institute and guest lectured at numerous theological and bible colleges, particularly in the areas of Youth Work, Creative Arts, Music and Liturgy. Her husband Terry joins her on many of her travels.

Other Contributors include:

Experiences: Rev Ian Robinson (Perth, WA); Rev Bronwyn Murphy (Narromine, Western NSW); Sue Bolton (Turrumurra, Sydney); Ross Neville (Board of Mission); Steph Gesling (West Epping, Sydney).

Artistic Contributions: Don Stewart (Song Lyrics: Wellsprings – administered by Willow Connection Pty, Ltd.) and Hari Santosa (“Jesus and the Disciples at Emmaus” – source and permission from the Asian Christian Art Association).

This Resource has been produced by the NSW-ACT Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia as a joint activity of the Board of Education and the Board of Mission.

© 2005, Chris Walker and NSW UCA Synod, Board of Education.

ERROR: syntaxerror
OFFENDING COMMAND: --nostringval--

STACK:

/Title
(
/Subject
(D:20050402140227)
/ModDate
(
/Keywords
(PDFCreator Version 0.8.0)
/Creator
(D:20050402140227)
/CreationDate
(peterh)
/Author
-mark-