

Growing Intentional Christian Communities of Practice!



SALTBUSH – Uniting the Scattered Community

This publication is brought to you as part of Saltbush – Uniting the Scattered Community. The Uniting Church Synod of NSW & ACT oversees this work as an encouragement to all rural Christian communities and their leaders, irrespective of size or location.

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Introduction!

Welcome to this opportunity to think about the challenge of being intentional in how we gather as the Christian community.

Dive into any part of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke & John) and you will find Jesus intentionally going about his ministry. At times it looks like chaos and no doubt it was, but at every step Jesus acts with intention. When he calls his disciples, in the conversations he had with women, when he touches the leper or blind or dead, as he sits down to eat with both religious leaders and outcasts, when he breaks the Sabbath laws, as he told stories and provided for the hungry – it is all intentional and focused on being the Way of Christ.

In contrast, the religious institution of Jesus day was structured, steadfast, struggling and on the whole unintentional and predictive. Amongst all the uncertainty of the time the religious institution was desperately trying to hold onto power and tradition. Opinions were strong, the law was salvation and it was seen that God belonged in the tradition as much as the tradition belonged to God. It is almost impossible for us today to grasp what it was like for Nicodemus, that older Pharisee and Jewish leader, a man of the religious institution, to come out to talk to Jesus one night. [John 3.]

Now in the 21st. Century, every corner of the church, every congregation, every Christian community is caught between the two extremes. Some have considered deeply who they are, how they gather and welcome people, how they live out their faith in the wider community while others are doing what they have always done, without conversation, unintentionally and fearful of any other way.

Alongside the intentional ministry of Christ were women and men who eventually went on to shape the rise of diverse gatherings of people who called themselves Christians. Across the lands, in homes and rooms, people gathered because of Jesus and they called themselves Christians and together they became the church. This is the foundation of our own congregations, our own gatherings and even the conversations we have here (today) about being intentional communities of practice as we think about how we are shaping who we are and how we live as Christian communities today.

There are four areas that we have identified as being central to intentional Christian communities of practice.

- Being relational (in relationship with others)
- Being inclusive (including diversity)
- Being about Discipleship (The way of following Christ)
- Being about Justice (Choosing how we respond)

For each of these areas we will delve into the Gospels, think about our own stories, talk together in small and large groups and challenge ourselves to take seriously the urging for the church in the 21st Century to be way more intentional about its life – both gathered and sent. Remember this isn't a lesson, or a study, or a course, but an opportunity to ponder and discern the way we respond to God's call upon us as disciples and Christian communities.

As we discuss each area you are invited to use this book for notes, thoughts, drawings and reflection. It might be something you use later or take back to your own church community!

- **gathering time of music and prayer**

- Music for reflection.
- Prayer together.

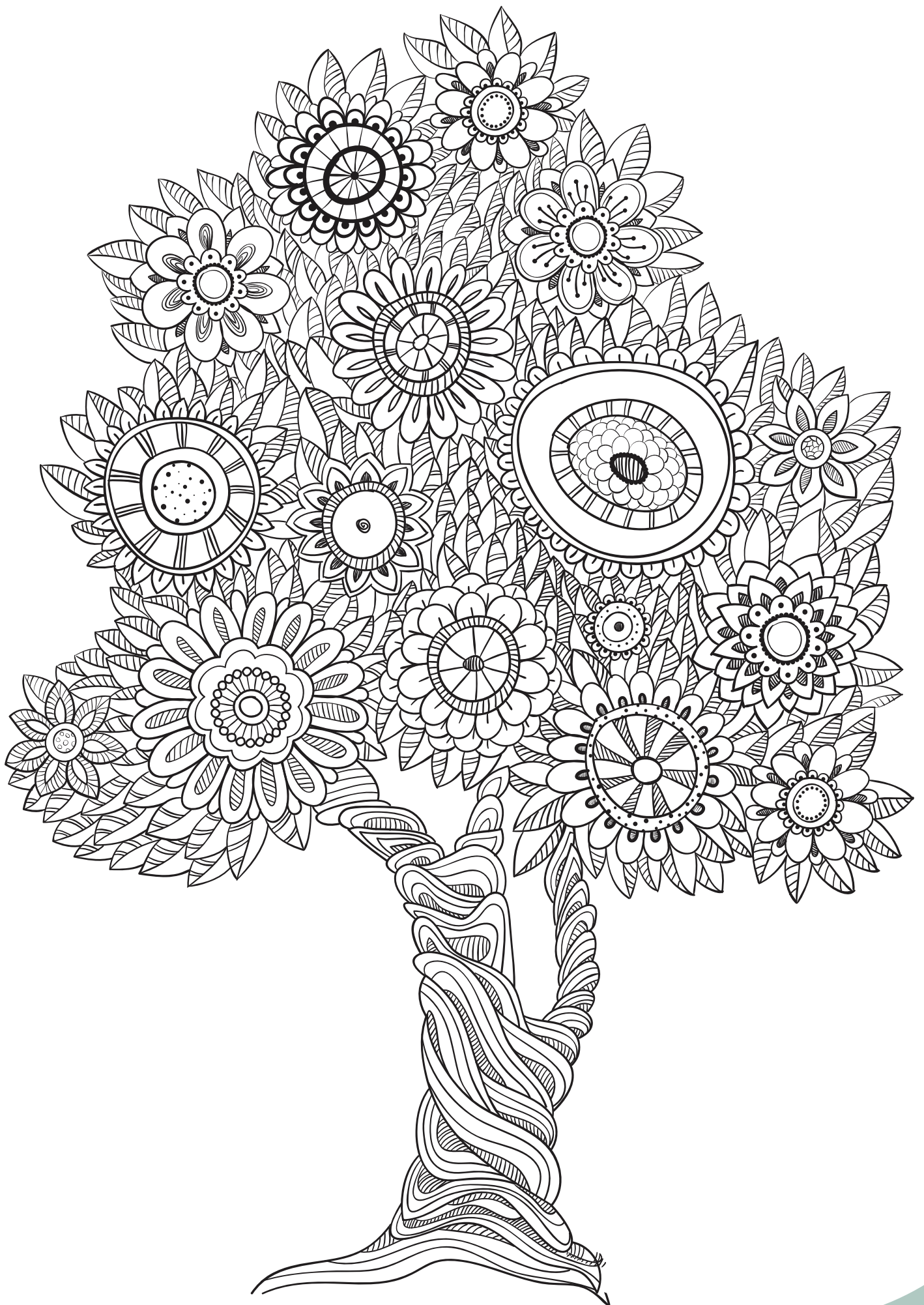
Jesus, you walked among us as one of us.
You called disciples to follow you
and welcomed everyone you met to seek justice
and live into the emerging reign of God.

Open our hearts, eyes and minds to experience your ongoing call to us today.

That we might also be open to living into being intentional Christian communities of practice in our neighbourhoods.

This we pray in the name of Jesus the Christ.

Amen.



Being Relational!

Conversation 1

In this conversation we will talk together about how significant being in relationship is for your own Christian community.

Reading the Gospel. Mark 7: 24-37.

Read the Gospel from both translations and let the words sit with you for a time.

The Syrophoenician Woman's Faith [New Revised Standard Version]

²⁴ From there he set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, ²⁵ but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. ²⁶ Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. ²⁷ He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁸ But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." ²⁹ Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

The Faith of a Gentile Woman [New Living Translation]

²⁴ Then Jesus left Galilee and went north to the region of Tyre. He didn't want anyone to know which house he was staying in, but he couldn't keep it a secret. ²⁵ Right away a woman who had heard about him came and fell at his feet. Her little girl was possessed by an evil[b] spirit, ²⁶ and she begged him to cast out the demon from her daughter.

Since she was a Gentile, born in Syrian Phoenicia, ²⁷ Jesus told her, "First I should feed the children—my own family, the Jews.[c] It isn't right to take food from the children and throw it to the dogs."

²⁸ She replied, "That's true, Lord, but even the dogs under the table are allowed to eat the scraps from the children's plates."

²⁹ "Good answer!" he said. "Now go home, for the demon has left your daughter." ³⁰ And when she arrived home, she found her little girl lying quietly in bed, and the demon was gone.

Theological Reflection

Both the Jewish and Christian traditions have a foundation of belief in a God of relationship. From the outset of the creation stories in Genesis, throughout the stories of the Exodus, the singing of Psalms and the cry of the Prophets, to the birth, life and death narratives of Jesus the Christ in the Gospels, over all these thousands of years we have perceived God as being in relationship.

We also know from our own lives that we are created and born into and for relationship. Being in relationship is essential for well-being and creativity in life.

There is however the tension that also exists in humanity as to who is in relationship with us, welcome, included and valued. In religion it has often been the practice to place this same human struggle at relationship onto God and into our understanding of God – our theology – for example, surely God must accept some people more than others! Perhaps surprisingly to us, we see this struggle even in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Syrophoenician woman comes to Jesus asking for her daughter to be healed. She was a woman, a gentile (not Jewish), from a region made up of a mixture of cultures and faiths. In whatever way we might want to paint Jesus as holy, in this passage, on this day, he is confronted with his prejudice, racism and a culture of broken relationship. We cannot simply talk our way out the offence of Jesus calling a woman a dog (along with the people/community she belonged to).

In the chapters of Mark before this, Jesus touches and heals the leper, enters the company of the Gerasene Demoniac and the woman with the enduring haemorrhage, displaying the longing of God for life and healing even amongst those who have been outcast. Now Jesus has chosen to go to the region of Tyre and is confronted by his own struggle to announce a God of longing and relationship to this Syrophoenician woman.

Hearing wider thoughts

Richard Rohr. The Wisdom Pattern: Order, Disorder, Reorder.

Richard Rohr appears to have one message that moves through all his books and seminars and is based on the idea that “our deepest identity is hidden from us, and that the purpose of authentic religion is to help us recover our true identity in God, this is the core message of this entire book, and really my only message in all of my books” (quote from Eager to Love). This is followed through in *The Wisdom Pattern*, where Rohr visits again the essential nature of our relationship with God in recovering our true identity: “Here, we do not know as much as we are known; we do not make the connections as much as realise we are connected. Then we can only kneel and kiss the ground.” Furthermore, Rohr invites us to move beyond the walls of our own experience as our relationship with God calls us to a more expansive reality: “Our goal ought to be spirituality connected to this world in every aspect, seeing the Divine Light shining through the mundane, the ordinary, the physical, the material, the entire cosmos- and not only in the churchy, the correct and the pure, which keeps our world split and contentious.” The nature of our relationship with God brings us to places of transformation and in one of his many life-challenging quotes Rohr reminds us that “We do not change so God will love us, God’s love for us makes us want to change.” Transformation, finding our true identity, can really only happen through an honest and open relationship with the Divine One who calls us beloved.

Talking with a few

In your group discuss these questions together.

1. What ideas, images, thoughts came to mind when you heard the bible text and the book reflection and as we talk about being relational?
2. What has been your own experience of being relational as part of faith or as part of church?

A place for anything you would like to write!

Talking to the many!

An opportunity to hear from the larger group. Share your thoughts and comments from your smaller group within the whole group.

Hearing a story!

She spoke to a person sleeping rough in her town, living on the edge. The story was shared with the leadership of the church and a proposal to commence what she called "loaves and fishes". Undeterred by a negative response, she sought another meeting with her contact and a wider group. The first meeting no one turned up. She learned the place she chose was problematic, as it was across the road from the police station. The second meeting was at the Church, where key leaders heard the stories of vulnerability. Loaves and Fishes was born, a home cooked meal at the Church, relationships, stories, and healing, through the intentionality of a lady who chose to speak up as part of a process that produced intentional Christian Community.

Talking about your own story

In your group discuss these questions together.

1. How do you go about including this idea of being relational in your own Christian community?
2. What further steps would you take to intentionally become more relational?

Step 1

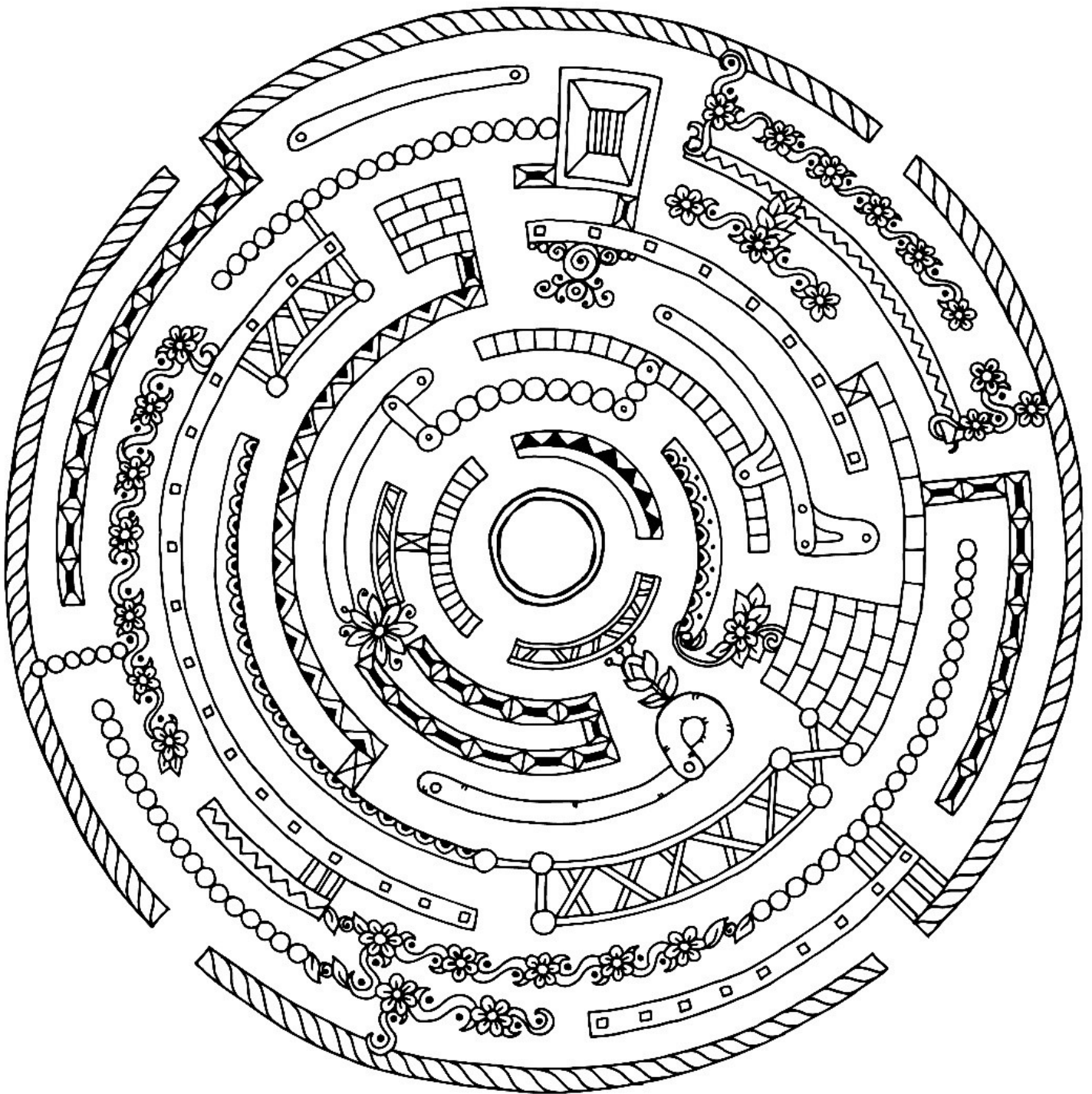
Step 2

Step 3

Hearing wider thoughts

An opportunity to hear from the larger group. Share your thoughts and comments from your smaller group within the whole group.

Do you have any other questions, comments or insights around being relational as part of intentional Christian community?



Being Inclusive!

Conversation 2

In this conversation we will talk together about the characteristic of being inclusive as part of being a Christian community.

Reading the Gospel Luke 10: 25-37

Read the Gospel from both translations and let the words sit with you for a time.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan [New Revised Standard Version]

²⁵ Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷ He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself." ²⁸ And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

²⁹ But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" ³⁰ Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' ³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

The Parable of the Good Samaritan [New Living Translation]

²⁵ One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: "Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?"

²⁶ Jesus replied, "What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?"

²⁷ The man answered, "'You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.' And, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'"

²⁸ "Right!" Jesus told him. "Do this and you will live!"

²⁹ The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"

³⁰ Jesus replied with a story: "A Jewish man was traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road.

³¹ "By chance a priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. ³² A Temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side.

³³ "Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. ³⁴ Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, 'Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I'll pay you the next time I'm here.'

³⁶ "Now which of these three would you say was a neighbour to the man who was attacked by bandits?" Jesus asked.

³⁷ The man replied, "The one who showed him mercy." Then Jesus said, "Yes, now go and do the same."

Theological Reflection

Of course, the lawyer wants to break down everything into the nitty gritty. He knows the Jewish law and the scriptures, probably by heart, and sees obedience as the key to reward in God's eyes. However, the scriptures never lay down every detail, even though some people still look for that today, and so to try to justify his own response in life to others, his inclusion or rejection of others, the lawyer wants more of the gritty detail and so asks Jesus.... "who is my neighbour"?

In the days of Jesus, much like today really, people were very bound to their own cultures, faiths and likenesses. Yet the reality was that the land was full of different cultures, nationalities, languages, faiths and traditions. Who is my neighbour and how far does that extend is a genuine question and for people of faith, also a question of what we believe. The struggle between Jew and Palestinian, Christian and Muslim, black and white, Anglo and Asian, rich and poor is equally a question of "Who is my neighbour"?

Jesus then tells a little story and while much loved it's a little story that is both hard to hear and hard to hold. The Parable of the Good Samaritan. This is a story saturated with people of the Jewish faith, the beaten man, the priest, the Levite, the inn keeper and into this comes the despised, outsider Samaritan, who takes care, generously, of the wounded Jew and ultimately demonstrated what it is to be a good neighbour – even love your neighbour as yourself. It's not that the Samaritans were not religious, they partly had and have their faith in the same Jewish history, but they were just one example of the "outsiders" in the days of Jesus and in ways and degrees, the unclean and despised.

To what looked like a very simple question, "Who is my neighbour?", Jesus gives a very difficult answer!

Hearing wider thoughts

Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, Made for Goodness, And Why This Makes All the Difference.

When considering inclusivity, there aren't many who can claim advocating for the inclusion of the oppressor in the process of decision making and seeking reconciliation and truth and not retribution. Desmond Tutu stands alongside Nelson Mandela as one who chose a road less travelled, one which became a living Gospel message.

Growing up under South African apartheid, Desmond Tutu has experienced enough injustice, oppression and cruelty to embitter any normal person. But the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize (1984) and chair of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission refuses to succumb to anger or futility. In fact, in this book he proclaims a wonderfully positive message, that each and every person is fundamentally good. Goodness is the essence of what it means to be human, rooted as it is in the first few pages of the Bible where God declares six times that "all he made" is "good," and then a seventh time that it is all "very good" (Genesis 1:31).

Tutu doesn't deny the reality of sin, suffering and evil, "but they are not our essential nature. They are aberrations. What is normative is goodness. Wrongness runs against the grain of creation" (194). The liberating implications of this, he tries to show, are that we need **not** try to be good in order to earn God's love, but simply accept that we are accepted.

Throughout the book Tutu draws upon the Xhosa word ubuntu, which means something like "tend and befriend." Ubuntu insists that we all need each other, that we can only be fully and truly human by acknowledging our interconnectedness. "My humanity is bound up with your humanity." The essence of inclusivity is recognising we are all one in Christ.

(Acknowledgments to the thoughts of Dan Clandenan)

Talking with a few

In your group discuss these questions together.

1. What ideas, images, thoughts came to mind when you heard the bible text and the book reflection and as we talk about being inclusive?
2. What has been your own experience of inclusion/exclusion as part of faith or as part of church?

A place for anything you would like to write!

Talking to the many!

An opportunity to hear from the larger group. Share your thoughts and comments from your smaller group within the whole group.

Hearing a story!

The Youth Group had spent a day at Gunnamatta beach, two hours south of Melbourne, where the cold Southern Ocean produces great waves on the eastern side of the Nepean Peninsular. It had been a great day and we were on our way back home, in our Youth Leader's EH Holden. Parents would be meeting us back at the Church. We were a little cold with wet towels wrapped around us and it was late afternoon. With a long line of traffic on a two-way road our car broke down. There were no mobile phones in those days and we could not see a phone box. (Remember then) We had no options available to us, until a large group of Hells Angels bikers surrounded our car. We were instructed to lock our doors and close our windows. A big bloke came up and banged on the window. "Bloody open your window mate". Then to our surprise he said, "Do you need a hand?". Within minutes we were back on the road. The youth leader said to us, remember this: "these blokes were Jesus to us today". I was around 12 years of age at the time. (Peter Overton)

Talking about your own story

In your group discuss these questions together.

1. How do you go about inclusion in your own Christian community?
2. What further steps would you take to intentionally become more inclusive?

Step 1

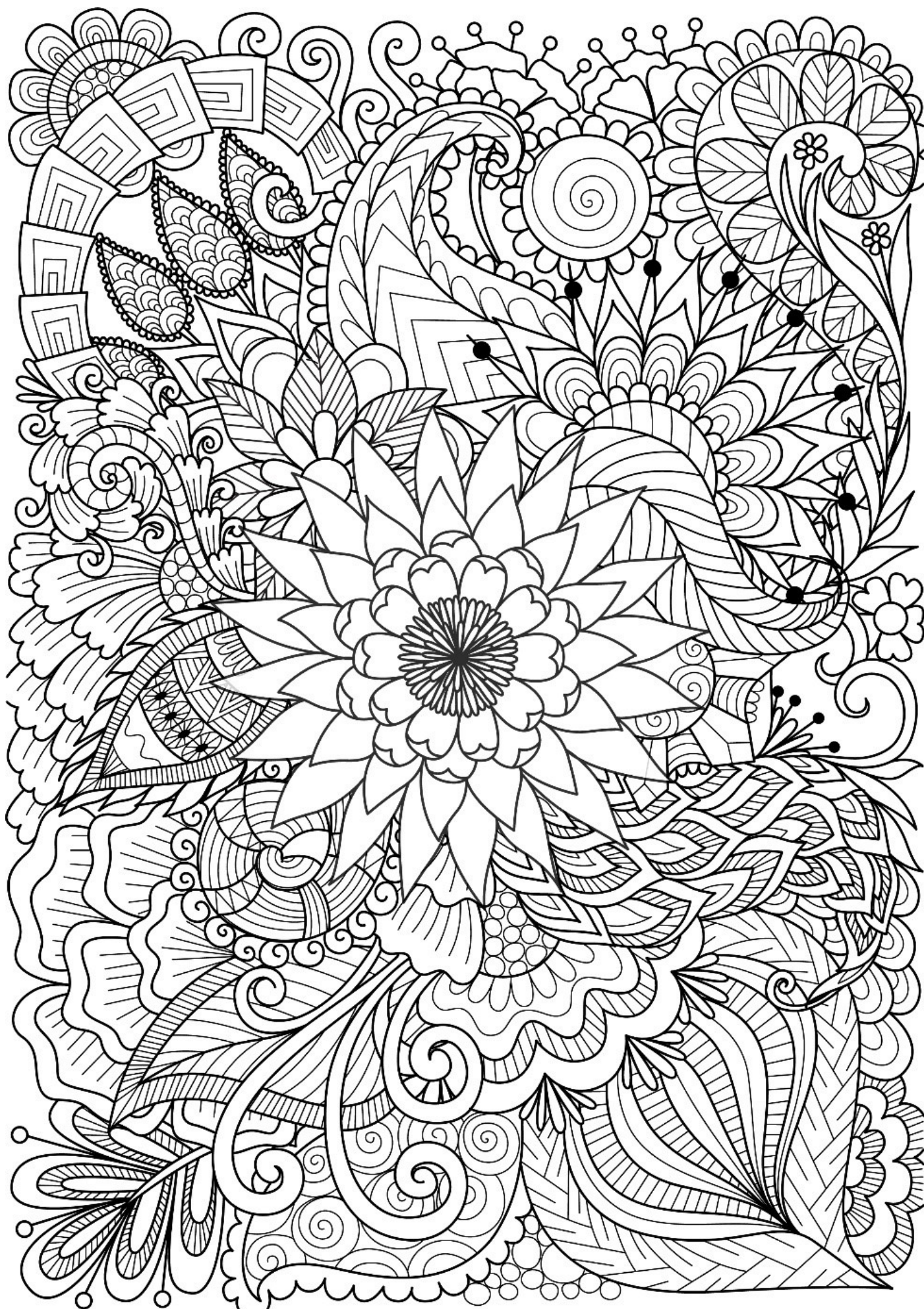
Step 2

Step 3

Hearing wider thoughts

An opportunity to hear from the larger group. Share your thoughts and comments from your smaller group within the whole group.

Do you have any other questions, comments or insights around being inclusive as part of intentional Christian community?



Being in Discipleship!

Conversation 3.

In this conversation we will talk together about the challenge of discipleship as part of being a Christian community.

Reading the Gospel Mark 1: 16-20.

Read the Gospel from both translations and let the words sit with you for a time.

Jesus Calls the First Disciples [New Revised Standard Version]

¹⁶ As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James, son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰ Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

Jesus Calls His First Disciples [New International Version]

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” ¹⁸ At once they left their nets and followed him.

¹⁹ When he had gone a little farther, he saw James, son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. ²⁰ Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

Theological Reflection

The good thing about the Gospel of Mark is that it is straight to the point. As much as we like to romanticise this passage where Jesus goes down by the Sea of Galilee and calls his first disciples, it is in reality pretty ordinary. The fishermen were the labourers, the brick layers, the fruit pickers, the delivery drivers of today. There were plenty of wandering religious figures in those days with multiple disciples. The invitation to follow was into the unknown and perhaps even, for James and John, not necessarily in their minds initially an invitation lasting for life. And yet, they must have had some sense of purpose to up and leave their day's work and their own father, Zebedee, to set off with Jesus.

This passage is one of three invitations to discipleship in the Gospel of Mark. The second is in the middle (8:34ff) and the last is right at the very end (16: 6ff). The Middle invitation to follow is not just to the disciples, but also to the crowd. Jesus calls them all and says to them that to be his followers there will be a cost. Followers have to deny themselves, let go, take up their cross and in an upside down way realise that life is not found by clinging to life.

The last invitation of Jesus in Mark's Gospel is to both follow and to go out into the world.

Of course, we read these passages thinking about the individuals – James and John, Peter and Andrew and the others – and yet surely, they can be heard as invitations to groups of people who are known as Christians thinking about what it means to be followers. Discipleship, following, belief, response, doesn't just happen, but as it was for each of the disciples, all along the way, it is for us to intentionally choose how we are going to respond and what being a disciple of Jesus ultimately meant.

Hearing wider thoughts

Diana Butler Bass, Christianity for the Rest of Us.

Living in a secular Australia where a vocal suspicion of institutions and those who claim a particular authority is one of our popular past times, we can often despair at reading about church life in a country that prides itself on its Christian heritage and where church attendance almost epitomises what it means to be an American.

However, what we find in *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, is an exploration into what are universal experiences of the Christian faith. In Butler Bass' book there are many stories of hope in a country where church attendance is in steep decline. These stories are about the various main-line churches that thrive (not necessarily numerically) by attending to specific core practices of hospitality, contemplation, diversity, justice, discernment, and worship.

Of the many stories some resembled our Uniting Church tradition. That we, can be at times, so focused on serving the community that we lose sight of our core practices. In one such story Butler Bass describes Trinity Episcopal Church. While Trinity was busily serving the needs of the community it felt it has lost something of its focus. The leadership realised: "that church could not serve as a social-service institution, a political party or a business. The primary job of a church is to be a spiritual community that forms people in faith." (p. 42) Butler Bass encourages us see with fresh eyes the core values and practices of our traditions. Our discipleship is wrapped up in our connectedness with the Divine and out of God's love: we act.

Talking with a few

In your group discuss these questions together.

1. What ideas, images, thoughts came to mind when you heard the bible text and the book reflection and as we talk about being in discipleship?
2. What has been your own experience of discipleship as part of faith or as part of church?

A place for anything you would like to write!

Talking to the many!

An opportunity to hear from the larger group. Share your thoughts and comments from your smaller group within the whole group.

Hearing a story!

The night service was enjoying a series over the past month on "Jesus the Directors cut". The Church had just appointed a Youth Pastor and it was his first Service. It was the last night of the series, and a bloke (Jeff - picture aging hippy with long pigtail) was the guest speaker. The Pastor did not know him, but the congregation did. So, he asks Jeff to come up to the front and he would interview him - so people got to know him. The usual questions were asked, then Jeff was asked "When did you become a Christian", and he said, "this morning". After around a minute, with laughter from the young people, and a red-faced Youth Pastor, the aging hippy said to him "every day when I wake up, I must consciously decide to follow Jesus, it is my daily practice."

Talking about your own story

In your group discuss these questions together.

1. How do you go about including discipleship in your own Christian community?
2. What further steps would you take to intentionally be more about discipleship?

Step 1

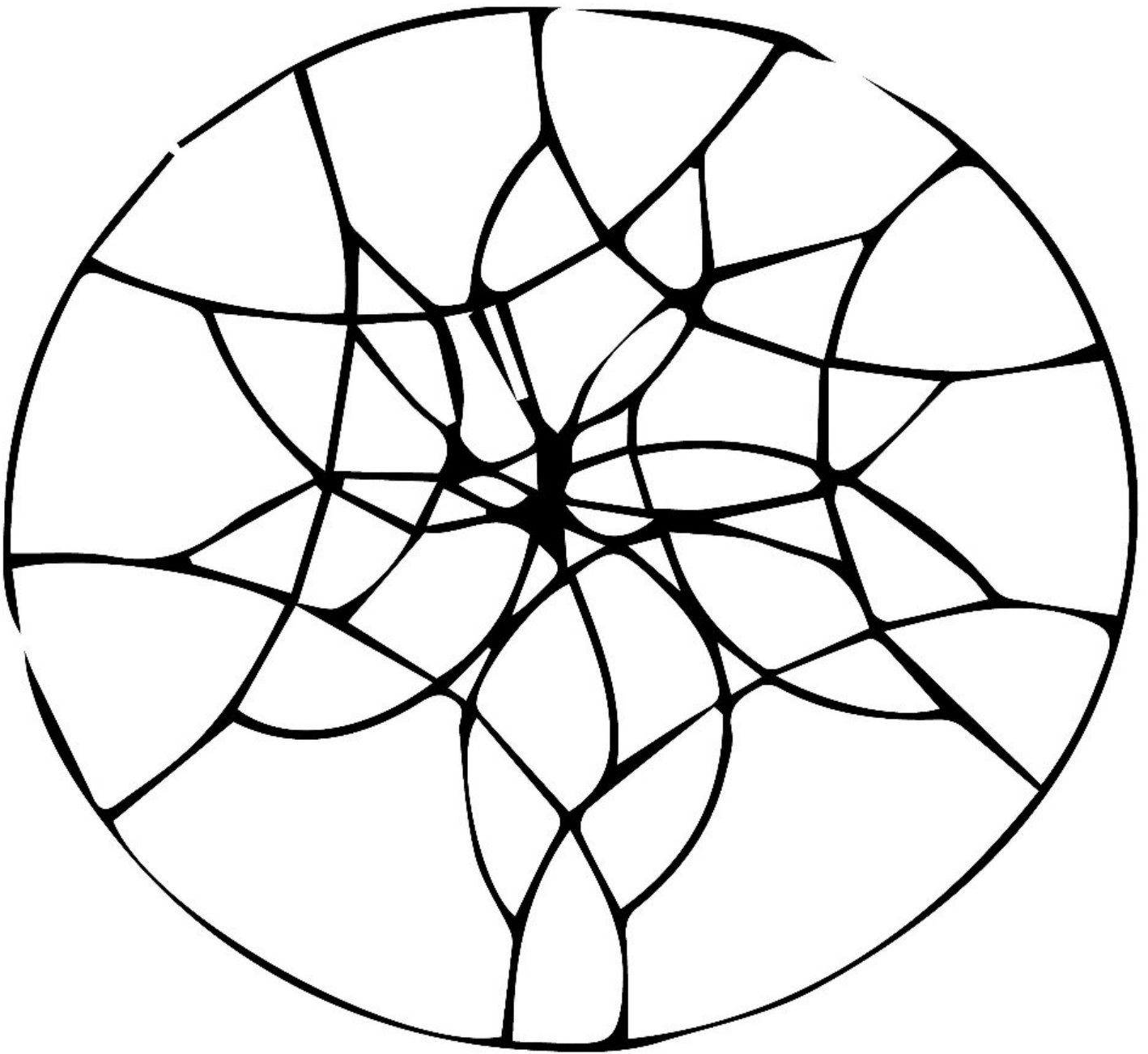
Step 2

Step 3

Hearing wider thoughts

An opportunity to hear from the larger group. Share your thoughts and comments from your smaller group within the whole group.

Do you have any other questions, comments or insights around being in discipleship as part of intentional Christian community?



Being about Justice!

Conversation 4

In this conversation we will talk together about justice as part of being a Christian community.

Reading the Gospel Matthew 5: 1-16, 7: 24-8:4.

Read the Gospel and let the words sit with you for a time.

The Beatitudes [New Revised Standard Version]

5 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely^[b] on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

¹³ "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

¹⁴ "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

²⁴ "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵ The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!"

²⁸ Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, ²⁹ for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

8 When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him; ² and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean." ³ He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I do choose. Be made clean!" Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. ⁴ Then Jesus said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

Theological Reflection

These passages look like a mixture of different stories and parables, sayings and blessings, but they are all connected. The passage of the leper being healed is perhaps the beatitudes, the light and salt, the solid foundation of responding to the word, all wrapped up in this life changing meeting.

It is an amazing conversation that Jesus has with the Leper even though here it is brief. The leper comes straight up and says... "Lord if you choose, you can make me clean". Jesus responds with simply.... "I do choose". In saying that Jesus is not simply referring to the choice of stretching out his hand and touching the leper, but saying "I do choose" to be about healing, to be about wholeness, to be about acceptance and the fullness of life. And simply the touching of the leper, the healing of the socially outcast is about justice. When the passage uses the word "cleansed", it doesn't just mean healed, it means religiously cleansed in the sight of the Priests and in how people viewed the man as acceptable, or unacceptable, to God. That's why Jesus tells the man... "...show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."

In spite of all that has been written and preached about The Beatitudes, they are difficult for anyone to grasp. Each blessing takes us into a seemingly upside-down riddle. It's also easy to preach on these for those whose lives are comfortable, wealthy, content and reasonably happy, but confronting for those who sit amongst the homeless, the dispossessed and hungry, the suffering ones and the powerless people.

For individual disciples and for our Christian communities there is a choosing to be done as to how we live out what we believe about the essence of God and the Way of Jesus the Christ. Like Jesus and the leper we could hear those words spoken to us..... "if you choose"..... then will we say... "I do choose"?

Hearing wider thoughts

Amy-Jill Levine, Short Stories by Jesus

In *Short Stories by Jesus*, the very well-respected Biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine brings fresh and insightful perspective to some of Jesus' most well-known parables. Levine works against the centuries of Christian interpretation that have domesticated Jesus's stories. Levine argues that the power of parable lies in its capacity to challenge and disturb us. In her words: "Parables bring to the surface unasked questions, and they reveal the answers we have always known, but refuse to acknowledge. Religion has been defined as designed to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. We do well to think of the parables of Jesus as doing the afflicting. Therefore, if we hear a parable and think, 'I really like that' or, worse, fail to take any challenge, we are not listening well enough."

Levine reminds us of the power of the parables of Jesus and that as we allow ourselves to hear what they are saying to our present, we gain a glimpse of the eternal, the reign of God now. As such we may re-align our understanding of justice to what we would hope be a more accurate reflection of God's design.

Talking with a few

In your group discuss these questions together.

1. What ideas, images, thoughts came to mind when you heard the bible text and the book reflection and as we talk about justice?
2. What has been your own experience of justice/injustice as part of faith or as part of church?

A place for anything you would like to write!

Talking to the many!

An opportunity to hear from the larger group. Share your thoughts and comments from your smaller group within the whole group.

Hearing a story!

He was a forensic accountant with a big company with a passion for working with young people. Being on the chaplaincy committee at the local school gave him significant insight into the needs of young people. Out of this was born the combined Churches youth group in the school hall on Sunday nights. There would be a home cooked meal provided so they all ate together; there were a number who often did not receive a Sunday night meal at home. Within a couple of months there were 30 kids attending: Church kids and non-Church kids. By mid-year it was still growing, and a decision was made to explore the appointment of a Youth Pastor in partnership with a Church from another town who had a Youth Group. Combined activities were arranged to further explore this possibility. And then we were told that whilst the church greatly admired what was being achieved, they were not prepared to allow their kids to be exposed and vulnerable because of the impact it might have on them. The Leaders that night decided to continue.

Talking about your own story

In your group discuss these questions together.

1. How do you go about including the practice of justice in your own Christian community?
2. What further steps would you take to intentionally become more just?

Step 1

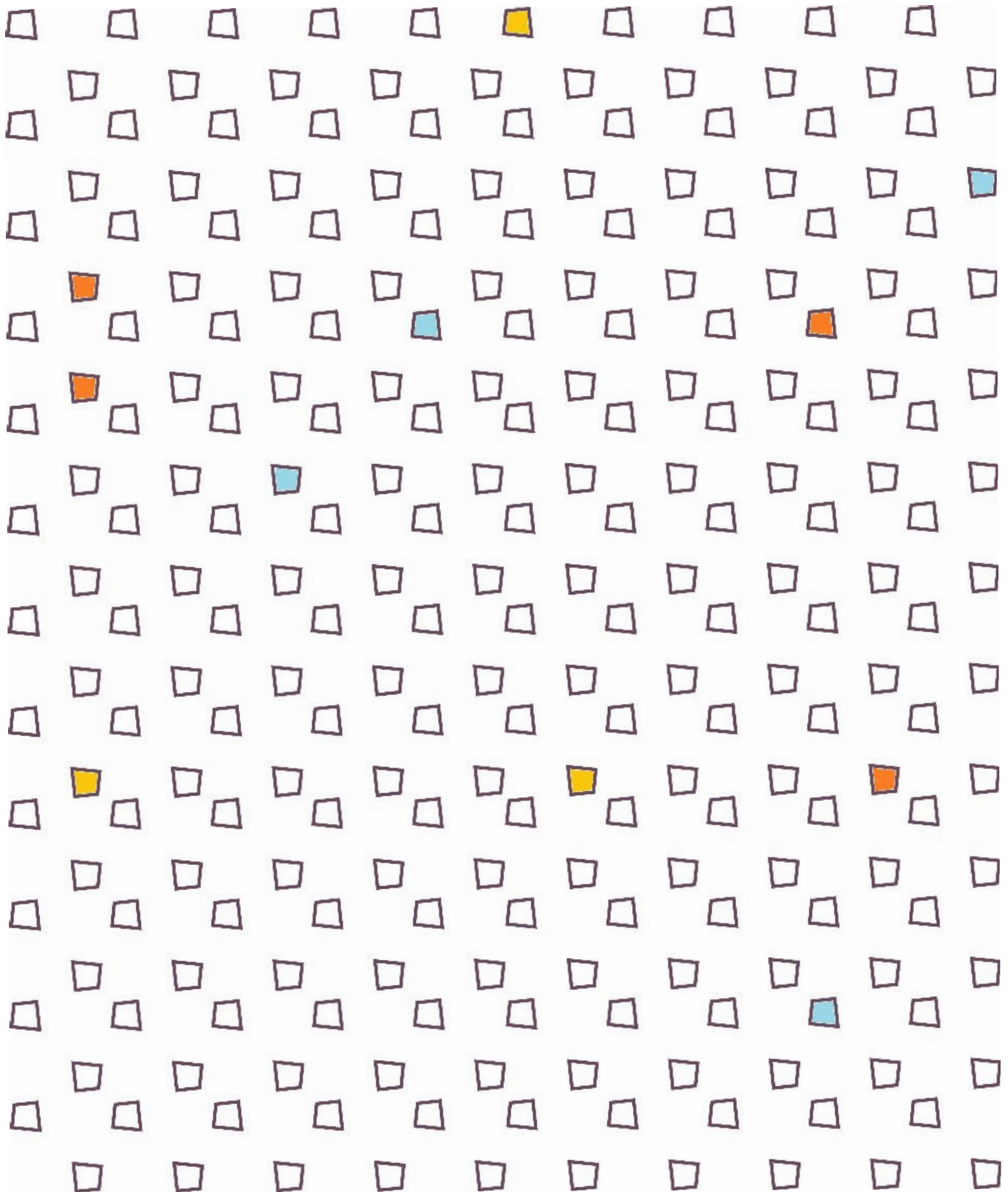
Step 2

Step 3

Hearing wider thoughts

An opportunity to hear from the larger group. Share your thoughts and comments from your smaller group within the whole group.

Do you have any other questions, comments or insights around justice as part of intentional Christian community?



Conclusion!

At the very heart of the gospel there is this call to come and follow Jesus, to be disciples of the Christ in ways that are relational, inclusive and involve justice. None of us can do that without being part of a group or movement that is bigger than our selves. In the last little while you have been exploring these topics through scripture readings, stories, conversation and music. The Saltbush Team hope that you have increased your knowledge and desire to be followers of Jesus the Christ in new and exciting ways, both as individuals and as part of a Christian community.

If you now look back at the notes and conversations you have had with others in each section you will see clues and ways that you can practice being more intentional about Christian community. This might become your "*intentional Christian Community Plan*". The Saltbush Team encourages you to take what you have experienced here and start with one or two things that you have identified so that you become more and more intentional about Christian community. It is good to write down what you intend to do and to talk about it with others often. That way we learn to encourage each other in what we are trying to do. Over time you can build on those small beginnings and as you learn, to listen for God's leading and what works in your Christian community, you can add to the practices of being disciples of Jesus.

	Steps	Ways
Conversation 1 Being Relational		
Conversation 2 Being Inclusive		
Conversation 3 Being in Discipleship		
Conversation 4 Being about Justice		

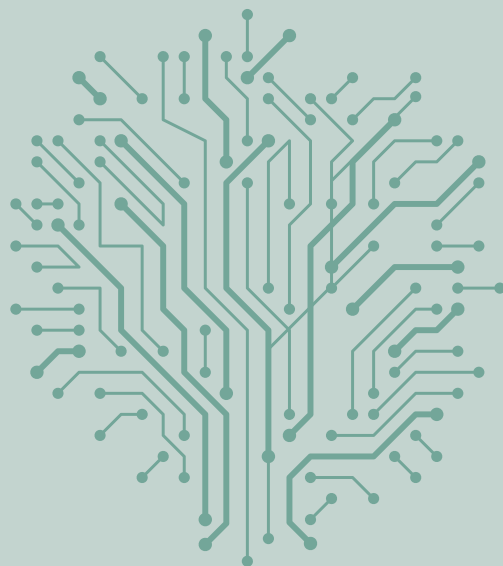
A time of blessing as we close

Calling Jesus,
we give thanks that you invite us
to be part of Christian community wherever we are.
Open our hearts to the voice of the Holy Spirit
that guides and encourages us towards discipleship and community.

Bless us and the people we meet along the way;
Father,
Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.





SALTBUSH

UNITING THE SCATTERED COMMUNITY