

MISSION IN ACTION



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2008 Lenten Study Guide
Lutheran Church of Hope

Welcome to the Small Group Study for Lent 2008! This year, Lutheran Church of Hope's yearlong focus is Hope for the World. We know that the only true "hope for the world" is Jesus Christ, and in this year, we are learning what it means to be Christ's hands and feet in the world, and then practicing what we've learned. The Bible is very clear that our faith is lived out in action, so grab your Bible, your small group, and strap in, we're gonna get moving!

~Pastor Caroline

WHAT'S THE ULTIMATE OBJECTIVE?

Week 4

To begin your small group time this week, share what you believe God is calling your group to do together to serve Jesus by serving the less fortunate in our community and around the world. Gather all the ideas together and compile a list of mission projects your small group could be involved in.

Over the last three weeks, we've learned that doing mission work is not a polite suggestion from Jesus, but a command. We also explored what our neighbors are like and the role of the Church as we wait for Jesus' return.

But what is the ultimate objective, the overarching goal for mission in action? What is supposed to be the final outcome of following Jesus' command?

Read Luke 5:17-26

This incident early in Jesus' ministry is filled with many teaching points: how Jesus' fame spread; how the religious leaders and teachers were both intrigued and anxious about Jesus' teaching and healings and the implications of them; how Jesus claimed to be God and then proved it by first forgiving a man's sins and then healing him physically. We could spend an entire evening on this story alone!

But let's focus on the friends of the paralyzed man. The relationship between the paralyzed man and his four friends (Mark's account (2:1-12) tells the readers there were four men who brought the paralyzed man to Jesus) is impressive. In first century Palestine, a paralyzed man had little to offer to others. He very likely was unemployed because his paralysis would have made physical labor difficult at best – there weren't many jobs at this time that consisted of sitting at a computer most of the day. So he couldn't earn a steady enough income to provide a home, food, and clothing for him and a family. Quite often, people who had physical challenges like paralysis had to resort to begging in the streets or relying on the kindness of friends and strangers in order to live day to day.

This dependence on others would also likely last his entire lifetime, given the state of medical knowledge and available treatment at the time. In fact, it was a common belief that illnesses such as these were actually punishments from God for some sin the victim had committed.

- ❖ Can you imagine how all these factors affected the paralyzed man's feelings of his own self-worth?
- ❖ Why do you think the four friends stayed friends with the paralyzed man, even knowing he had little to offer in return from a material standpoint?
- ❖ Can you think of people or other relationships that are like the relationship between the paralyzed man and his friends – a relationship of unequal dependence? Do you have any relationships like this? If so, what do you think of them?

The four friends were a creative group that didn't let a little thing like a crowd get in the way. Imagine hearing a rumor that a new healer is in town, so you call your buddies together and go together to your paralyzed friend. Imagine spending time trying to coax him out of a feeling of hopelessness long enough to convince him to give another new healer a try. Imagine the number of times you nearly drop your friend as you try to coordinate with your three other buddies (the uncoordinated oafs!) to carry him along the crowded streets to the house where Jesus is teaching. Imagine the look of defeat on your friend's face when he sees the crowd and knows he'll be disappointed once again. Imagine the determined look you give your buddies when you shout for them to head to the roof. Then imagine the look of sheer incredulity on your friend's face when you start pulling up the roof shingles and tell him to just hold on tight.

- ❖ Share a time you creatively solved a problem. Did you have to buck the crowd or convince skeptics? Was it easy? Was it worth it? Why or why not?
- ❖ When Jesus remarked on the faith of the men, what do you think the men had faith in? (Reread verse 20).

As best we can tell from the text, none of these men had met Jesus before, but they were drawn to him because of the news and rumors swirling about Jesus being a healer. We can certainly imagine the men had faith in God, in YHWH, since they were very likely Jewish, but did they have faith in someone else? Do you think they also believed that their friend was worthy of being healed, that they even had faith *for* their friend when faith seemed in short supply in the paralyzed man's world? Did they have faith in their friend even though the society may not have considered a paralyzed man as valuable as a man who wasn't paralyzed? Did faith allow them to see beyond society's blind spots and see a fellow human being made in the image of God who was precious in God's eyes and therefore worth the effort of a relationship?

- ❖ When you face difficult times and it seems hard to trust in God's promises, who has faith *for* you? You do you support with faith when circumstances seem to beat down a friend or family member?
- ❖ Where in the world today do Christians need to see other humans as worthy of a relationship, love, and care? Let your brainstorming range both locally and globally.
- ❖ How should Christians respond when the world scoffs and says the problems of the world are beyond solving? How do Christians answer those who say we really can't make a lasting difference?

Occasionally skeptics will ask why a congregations "wastes" money on mission trips when the money used for plane fares, food, and lodging could instead go directly to the people who need the financial help so desperately. This is actually a good question to ask so we honestly face our motivations for going on a mission trip.

But money cannot buy everything and certainly cannot buy the most important things in life. Pr Sam Dunya, our mission partner in Ghana, answers this very question of why it's important for Hope to send mission trips twice a year. Pr Sam appreciates the money, but he recognizes that the *relationships* that are built are incredibly important. From these relationships, several important things happen:

- The pastors that Pr Sam is training and developing are very encouraged when mission teams arrive. We must not forget how difficult and lonely leadership can be and how seeing others who are praying and caring for you can motivate and encourage a leader to continue along a road that can be very hard.
- When non-Christians see the mission team being the eyes, ears, hands, and feet of Jesus, the Gospel is preached in a powerful way without using words. Watching someone live out their faith is often more compelling than hearing words that aren't backed up by actions.
- Mission teams teach and bring expertise in many areas:
 - Vacation Bible School for the children
 - Agricultural techniques for the village
 - Medical clinics for the sick
 - An example of teamwork for the village and especially the pastors
 - An example of selflessness

Pr Sam has said that one of the most persuasive lessons the teams teach is when the mission teams are willing to physically touch people that the Ghanaians themselves are reluctant to touch. You can't physically touch another human being if all you do is write a check.

❖ What struck you most about Pr Sam's reaction to mission teams? Why?

Read Luke 24:13-27

This is the familiar story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. It is Sunday and the disciples are leaving Jerusalem, confused and fearful. Their leader was just executed by the State and given how they reacted, the disciples had to admit they weren't poster children for faithful followers. As the action moved from the triumphant entry into Jerusalem just a week ago, to the devastating confrontations with the religious leaders, to the chilling suspicion that there was a traitor in their midst, to the arrest, phony trial, and finally the death of Jesus, the disciples confessed their actions were those of faithless cowards, hiding from the authorities in order to avoid the same fate as their leader.

And then there was the incredible rumor that Jesus had actually risen from the dead! Course, that rumor originated with the women, and so you couldn't put any stock in it (Luke 24:11) – the first instance of male chauvinism in the early Church! 😊

As we read through this account, we can identify four movements the disciples will go through as they begin to understand what is happening in the world and how the world is being put right-side up again.

First, the disciples ask, "What is going on here?" (Luke 24:14). They are reflecting on the previous week, a week that's turned out disastrously. The Jesus Movement seems to be over, crushed by the Romans, and they're scared witless since the Romans' normal mode of operation was to wipe out not only the leader of a subversive movement, but everyone who was connected to it in any way. So they were sure they were on a list of subversives and would soon be tracked down.

This is such a blow to them because they hoped Jesus would be "the one to redeem Israel" (24:21). But Israel wasn't redeemed. In fact, the *enemies* of Israel had wiped out Jesus in just five short days. Something was missing, some evidence had to have been overlooked, and they weren't able to figure out what that was.

Part of what was missing is provided in the second movement in the story. A stranger joins the disciples and they share their frustrations and questions with him. The stranger seems to be some kind of teacher or rabbi, and proves to be a stern one at that! "Foolish men, how slow you are in understanding what is clearly taught about Messiah!" And so the stranger holds a Bible class, interpreting Moses and the prophets so the disciples gain clarity and can understand the events of the last week.

One very important point that the stranger is trying to make plain is what it means to redeem Israel. Redemption means to draw people together, to set them on a new path, to reconcile and heal, to usher in a new era of compassion, understanding, and justice. Redemption means to bring into relationship!

❖ Is this a new understanding of redemption for you? If so, how does that change your understanding of Jesus' mission and ministry? Your outlook on the Christian life?

Read Luke 24:28-35

The stranger has held a private seminar on redemption and now intends to keep traveling, but the disciples invite the stranger to stay with them. This is a crucial part of the story, the third movement. The disciples have been talking about redemption, talking about relationship, but when they invite the stranger to stay with them ("urged him strongly" 24:29 – they weren't going to take 'no' for an answer), they move from *talking* about relationship to *acting* in a relationship. The person moves from being a stranger to being a companion.

The word companion is derived from the Latin words *cum*, meaning with and *panis*, meaning bread. So a companion literally means one with whom you share bread – someone you invite to share a meal with you.

And it is in sharing that meal, in actually acting in a relationship, that the disciples finally understand the whole truth. When the disciples move from words to deeds, they receive clarity. What they receive isn't just information, they receive a new relationship. Notice also that this new relationship helps the disciples understand the past as well as the present. When the disciples begin to understand while they sit around the table, they also begin to understand what was happening as they walked along the road, even though at the time they were too dense to comprehend what was going on (24:32).

- ❖ Where was Jesus made known? (Hint: reread 24:30-31)
- ❖ If action and relationships are a necessary part of the Christian life, can you simply listen to podcasts of sermons in the comfort of your private home and believe you will grow in understanding and faith?

As soon as the disciples recognized Jesus, he disappeared!

Talk about a bummer! The disciples finally had Jesus sitting with them, they finally understood what had happened over the last months and years, and as soon as they had their huge epiphany moment, it's over. Wouldn't you have wanted to at least spend the evening with Jesus discussing things, making plans, just celebrating what had happened?

This is where the fourth movement in the story occurs. Once Jesus disappears, the action doesn't remain at the table, but moves outside the walls. The disciples jump up and hike the seven miles *back* to Jerusalem, even though it's late in the day. They make the round trip because they need to be back at the scene of the action, telling people what has happened.

So the road to Emmaus really leads back to Jerusalem – from the scene of the action, through reflection, to a new kind of action: action → reflection → new action. The disciples return to Jerusalem, the place of fear and anxiety and danger, but they return with a new understanding; an understanding that can deal with the fear and anxiety even in the face of danger. Instead of cowering behind locked doors, the disciples boldly step out, risking their lives because of a new relationship with Christ.

- ❖ Has your relationship with Jesus changed how you view fear and anxiety and danger? In what ways?
- ❖ Has your relationship with Jesus changed how you view your relationship with others? Have you acted on the change or are you still discussing the change? Do you need to make the move from reflection to action?
- ❖ The philosopher George Santayana once wrote that those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it. How similar is this to the stranger telling the two disciples they needed to understand the past in order to understand the present? Do you need to make the move from action to reflection?

So to answer the question posed at the beginning ... the goal for mission in action is relationship; a deeper relationship with God and a deeper relationship with others, especially with those society would ignore, overlook, or disregard.

Pr Sam, as the mission team boards the plane back to the US, reminds us all that though our time is so short, our works are mighty. May our works glorify God and be mighty in his eyes!

Closing Prayer:

A Franciscan Benediction

May God bless you with discomfort
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,
So that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger
At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
So that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless you with tears
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war,
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and
To turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness
To believe that you can make a difference in the world,
So that you can do what others claim cannot be done
To bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor.

Amen

This week, put into action what Jesus commanded: relationships of love and caring with the sick, the poor, the outcast, the overlooked, the ignored.

Lutheran Church of Hope has the privilege of hosting *World Vision Experience: AIDS step into Africa* from Mar 27-31. This interactive exhibit allows you to walk in the footsteps of a child living in an AIDS-affected community in Africa. The exhibit features a stirring audio tour combined with captivating photography that will transport you to the heart of Africa. You'll gain a completely new perspective on the greatest humanitarian crisis of our time: AIDS.

First, to tour the exhibit, go to the Hope website (www.hopewdm.org) and register for a time to view the exhibit; you should plan to be there between 30 and 40 minutes. This is a time for gaining knowledge and reflecting on how this pandemic is affecting an entire continent.

Now the challenge for you and for your small group will be how to move from reflection to action. A very simple step would be to volunteer to help at the exhibit by registering at the Hope website. You will also have the opportunity to financially adopt one of the children in Africa, to take part in the annual AIDS walk in Des Moines on Saturday, April 12, and to continue to pray for all those affected by HIV/AIDS and those who are working diligently to stop the pandemic.

God may challenge you and your small group to another mission effort. Take another look at the list you compiled at the beginning of this session. Choose one of the projects to start with and plan the first action step and when you will take that first step. Continue to pray and discuss where God is calling you, but don't forget to be filled with God's discomfort, anger, tears, and foolishness as you move to bring his everlasting love to the world around you!



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