

# Introduction

This three-week study is intended to supplement the *Compassionate. Commissioned. Courageous. Values for Abiding Together* paper prepared by That We May Be One (TWMBO). TWMBO is a group within the Texas Annual Conference committed to being a church that is diverse in thought and united in mission. Our hope is that it might serve as a starting point for discussion as churches and small groups follow the path of Christ in a difficult time.

## Week One Compassionate

*Read the following excerpt to orient the discussion.*

As it was then, so now Jesus surveys each of our communities and no doubt sees our distress and is moved again with compassion. Jesus' compassion compels and propels him forward in mission, not singularly but through and within community. And so, Jesus turns to his disciples and invites them into a compassionate response for the sake of engaging and expanding ministry, so that none of his sheep might be lost, but all may be saved.

### Questions for Discussion

*The leader asks the following questions to help establish shared values and stories for the small group:*

**Q1 Think back to your first few Sundays coming to your church. What drew you to your church? How did you feel the presence of Christ here?**

**Q2 What values and experiences unite our congregation to one another? Share specific examples if you are able.**

**Q3 What are the stories of acts of compassion in our congregation?**

### The Feeding of the 4,000: A Biblical Example of Compassion

*The following discussion looks at the feeding of the 4,000 in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus is moved by compassion, but the disciples are concerned more with practicalities. Read or summarize the section below.*

Compassion is a calling for all Christians. However, Christians have often let fear short-circuit what might have been a powerful act of compassion.

Consider, for example, the well-known story of Jesus feeding the 4,000 in Matthew 15. Jesus is teaching and healing near the Sea of Galilee. In his presence, unbelievable things are erupting all around – the blind can see, the lame can walk, the mute can speak, and more. Jesus sees the masses coming to him and is moved with compassion:

Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way.” - Matthew 15:32 NIV

Whatever the disciples had come to believe about the compassion of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, they clearly believed it had limits. They replied to him:

His disciples answered, “Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?”  
-Matthew 15:33 NIV

The disciples let fear, practicality, or plain low expectations seep into their understanding of what God was doing. Jesus, as we know, gathers the meager food they did have, then he prays and passes out the food until all were more than satisfied. It seems that low expectations of what God can do can look very foolish indeed!

The disciples also fundamentally misjudge Jesus' motivation. He is moved by "compassion *for these people*" (v 32). When they respond, they focus on themselves - "Where could *we* get enough" (v 33). By focusing on themselves and their abilities, they limited the work of God. Jesus invited them into a community of compassion, powered by the Holy Spirit and the grace of God. He does the same for us today.

We are at a crossroads in the United Methodist Church. Thankfully, we are not alone. Our task is Christ's task. The question that faces us is the same as it was for those disciples: *will we join Christ in the hard work of compassion, or will we turn from his mission?*

## Discussion

*Read the following section of the paper.*

Jesus' compassion calls each of us - his disciples - to recognize each other as co-laborers in Christ, even when we disagree and are sent in different directions to different mission fields. As we, the members of the Texas Annual Conference, discern how God is calling us into the mission field, let us hold fast to Jesus' compassion as the grounding principle of our continued common life.

Let us see with compassion those who consider themselves traditionalists and let us feel deeply their heartfelt desire for spiritual revival, for evangelistic fervor, for biblical literacy and fidelity, for a commitment to covenant community and covenant keeping, and for spreading "Scriptural holiness over the land."

Let us see with compassion those who consider themselves progressives and let us feel deeply their heartfelt desire for spiritual formation, for missional fervor, for biblical responsibility and justice, for inclusion, for a commitment to seeing the reign of God made manifest in every life, and for the expected transformation of the world through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us.

Let us see with compassion those who consider themselves centrist or moderate and let us feel deeply their heartfelt desire for the unity of the Spirit, for integrity to Scripture, for repentance and peacemaking, and for reconciliation through the love of God in Christ Jesus.

*Ask the following questions:*

**Q4 Which parts of the paper above are easy for us and our community?**

**Q5 Which parts seem hard?**

**Q6 What is one tangible thing our group could do to go out of our way to show compassion for a group of folks who need it?**

# Week Two

## Commissioned

*Read the following excerpt to orient the discussion.*

All of us are gifted with God's grace and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be co-laborers in the ministry of the gospel for the salvation of the world. All of us are responsible to the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20)

So let us commission each other – with fasting and prayer and the laying on of hands – to go forth in the power of the Holy Spirit to bless the world in Jesus' name.

### **Antioch: A Biblical Example of Commissioning**

As Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 12, each of us is a part of the body of Christ. It's not just that each of us is unique, but also that each of us has a unique job to do. Christians are both commissioned by God, called for a specific purpose, and also told to commission others for their own work in the world. It is something that we receive and bestow.

The ancient church in Antioch was a church that had itself been commissioned for a unique purpose and which commissioned people to carry out the unique purposes that the Spirit had given them. This church is featured in our section of the paper today. In order to fully understand what was going on in Antioch, read Acts 11:19-26.

In the first round of persecution in Jerusalem, some Christians escaped north to Antioch and founded a church there. In keeping with Peter's revelation in Acts 10 that the mark of a true Christian wasn't whether a person lived in accordance with the traditional interpretation of certain Scriptures, but instead whether or not they had the Holy Spirit, the church in Antioch quickly began accepting gentiles as full members. Barnabas is commissioned by the Christians in Jerusalem to bless this congregation if he sees evidence of the Holy Spirit in it. He does, and the church is commissioned to evangelize in the city of Antioch. It became the largest church in the Roman Empire, and it was the first that we know of that had both Gentiles and Jews.

However, not everyone who was a part of it was called to stay. Paul and Barnabas eventually get commissioned from Antioch to evangelize the Gentiles. The Christians in Antioch bless them as they go their own way to multiply the church. Read Acts 13:1-3.

And here's where the church history gets really cool. If you look throughout Paul's letters, you'll find references to taking up an offering for the poor in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem church, led by James, the brother of Jesus, was not as open to gentile Christians as the Antioch church was (check out Galatians 2 for more on that). So, Paul thought that by collecting money from gentiles and bringing it back to the Jerusalem church, he might be able to bridge the separation that existed between them. Paul did that very thing- and it was returning to Jerusalem to bring that offering that occasioned his arrest and eventual death.

But there's more. In 70AD, Rome laid siege to Jerusalem and it crumbled. Jews have been scattered ever since. The Jewish Christians were refugees, with no possessions, little money, and nowhere to go. But they remembered the generosity of those Gentile Christians they weren't so sure about. And so a number of them arrive in Antioch, wondering if they might find sanctuary, and they're received with open arms. In terms of the church's stance on being a church for both Jews and gentiles, it's the legacy of Antioch that lives on today. And it's possible that none of it would have happened, if the Antioch church hadn't commissioned Paul and Barnabas to leave and go about their work somewhere else.

*Ask these questions:*

**Q1 What is a commission God has given you at some point in your life?**

**Q2 Share stories of a person who helped you understand what God's commission for you might be.**

## Discussion

*Read the section of the paper on commission or the excerpt below. It takes the legacy of the church of Antioch as a jumping off point for us to think about our practicing of commissioning today.*

Jesus not only invites his disciples to share his compassion, but he commissions them into the mission field. ... We see this affirmed in the Gospels with the sending of the Twelve and the Seventy, in the Great Commission, and in the Acts of the Apostles, particularly with the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13. Here, Paul and Barnabas are active within the large, strong, and mixed church community in Antioch, a city of both Jews and Gentiles. The church in Antioch modeled for the church and the world a "big tent" mentality. As the Bible geographer and scholar John A. Beck has remarked,

Antioch of Syria served as a model for Jewish-Christian relationships. ...Problems could easily have developed in this mixed community, but the city itself played a role in diminishing any frictions between Jew and Gentile. ...Luke includes this Christian church in Antioch because it sets an example of a culturally mixed church whose members get along.

Even so, in Acts 13 we find that the Holy Spirit sees fit to set apart Paul and Barnabas from within this "big tent" church. Not everyone in this "big tent" is called to go or to stay, but the Holy Spirit sees an opportunity to multiply and expand the good news throughout the world. And so, obedient to the Spirit, the church in Antioch commissions them after much fasting and prayer and the laying on of hands.

...

As we wrestle to discern what the Holy Spirit is yet saying to The United Methodist Church – and particularly, to the Texas Annual Conference – could we through compassion for one another re-orient our conversations about separation to focus more on how we might commission each other to fulfill the work to which God has called us?

...

All of us are gifted with God's grace and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be co-laborers in the ministry of the gospel for the salvation of the world. All of us are responsible to the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20)

*Ask these questions:*

**Q3 Who is someone God might be calling you to commission? Someone who would gain confidence in their service to God because they received encouragement and a prayer of blessing from you?**

**Q4 When commissioning someone requires them to leave you, there can be a feeling of personal loss and grief for you. How do I know when it's the right thing to do?**

**Q5 In this season of denominational disagreement, it is likely that some pastors, churches, and church members may feel commissioned by God to go somewhere else. If that describes you, how can you bless the ones you're leaving? If it describes others, how can you be a blessing to them as they go?**

# Week Three

## Courageous

*This week assumes that members of the group have read the “Courageous” section of the paper. If not, read the following excerpt to orient the discussion.*

The United Methodist Church was born and came of age in a time of convergence. Buildings were easy to build, weekly worship attendance was the expectation rather than the exception, and businesses were closed on Sundays because we could all agree on what was most important in life. But now the UMC is middle-aged, and the world of our youth is gone. Divergence is the game of the day now, and nothing in our upbringing could have prepared us for it. But there is another way.

We can choose convergence again.

### Questions for Discussion

*Ask the following questions to help establish shared values and stories for the small group:*

**Q1 Think back to the church in the middle decades of the last century, either in your experience or what you were told. In what ways did the culture support church communities?**

**Q2 Thinking over the last few decades, what changed? How is our culture different now than it was in the mid-twentieth century?**

**Q3 Looking back over the life of your church, has it been a place where members could share different opinions on social issues? Can you think of any examples of where it was or was not?**

### Corinth: A Biblical Example of Courageous Convergence

*The following discussion looks to Paul’s letter to the Corinthians as an example of what courageous convergence looks like.*

*Read 1 Corinthians 8:*

Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that “We all possess knowledge.” But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. <sup>2</sup>Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know. <sup>3</sup>But whoever loves God is known by God.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that “An idol is nothing at all in the world” and that “There is no God but one.” <sup>5</sup>For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), <sup>6</sup>yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

<sup>7</sup>But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. <sup>8</sup>But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

<sup>9</sup>Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. <sup>10</sup>For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? <sup>11</sup>So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. <sup>12</sup>When you sin against them in this way and wound their

weak conscience, you sin against Christ. <sup>13</sup>Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall. - 1 Corinthians 8 NIV

Despite not being an issue today, the question of eating food sacrificed to idols was a major issue in Christian communities that cut to the heart of their core beliefs and identity.

In the world of Corinth, idol worship was everywhere. It was quite common for people to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols, as that meat ended up in the Roman marketplace. For those who were gentile (non-Jewish) converts to Christianity, eating food that had been sacrificed to idols was likely something they had done for a long time. Furthermore, Paul seems to be on their side when he argues that many see that idols are “Nothing in the world” and that there is “no God but one.” Therefore, eating meat from idols was of little consequence for Christians, as those other gods do not exist.

Jewish Christians, however, did not see it this way. Jews had lived in a Gentile world for a long time. They navigated the all-important commandment against worship of other gods by rigorously abstaining from anything that might even appear to be idolatry. The issue was so contentious that it had come up in the Council of Jerusalem. The apostles, who were Jewish Christians, wrote to gentile believers,

You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things - Acts 15:29 NIV

The issue was about “more than food,” as both sides seemed to see it as a question of basic beliefs about who they were and who God is. As intractable as it seems to have been, Paul asks them to come courageously together for the sake of love. Powerfully, he argues that the Corinthians are responsible to one another’s salvation, and therefore they must stay in relationship despite disagreements on fundamental issues. After all, if you are committed to the salvation of your brothers and sisters, why would you abandon them or cause them to fall into sin? He writes,

Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall. -1 Corinthians 8:9-13 NIV

## Discussion

*Read the following section of the paper:*

Paul doesn’t ask the Corinthians to compromise their convictions, and neither does he ask them to agree on policy. He asks them to come together on the core principle of love.

That is the path of courage. Courage overcomes divergence because courage calls us to come together on our core.

Courage separates the core from the contextual. The core is who we are; that which makes us, us. The core is a set of principles that define our enduring identity. The contextual, however, is the infinite ways in which we live out the core.

As United Methodists, the core of who we are is found in our fidelity to Jesus Christ; the primacy of Scripture, as interpreted through tradition, reason, and experience; the historic creeds of the Church; and the heritage of John Wesley. The contextual is how we make the core happen in our mission fields around the world. The contextual will look different across cities and nations, but the core will remain.

It is when we can name what our core principles are, and what they are not, that we can come together and enjoy the fruits of convergence. There's a shared sense of who we are. Courage protects and stays true to the core, while allowing the contextual to be contextual.

Courage names the fundamental dangers to our church as those that threaten the core of who we are - they include the mutual distaste for one another in the body of Christ, the departure from one another, and the obsession with what makes us different rather than a celebration of what brings us together.

Courage recognizes the disagreement over human sexuality as what it is - a disagreement. This disagreement is over the interpretation of Scripture, not the core principle of the authority of Scripture. Courage allows disagreements to remain disagreements when they do not belong to the core of who we are. We may continue being different on this disagreement and be together on mission.

Now is a moment of choice for the UMC and, closer to home, the people of the Texas Annual Conference. Will we choose courage?

*Ask the following questions:*

**Q4 What do you believe are the “intractable issues” in the UMC?**

**Q5 How can churches disagree and yet remain united?**

**Q6 Why is it important for us to follow Paul's instruction to his church in Corinth and seek courageous convergence?**