

FINDING PEACE IN AN ANXIOUS WORLD

Leader's Guide

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Finding Peace in an Anxious World Leader's Guide
by Olivia DiAgostino

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United Methodist Women Purpose

The organized unit of United Methodist Women shall be a community of women whose purpose is to know God and to experience freedom as whole persons through Jesus Christ; to develop a creative, supportive fellowship; and to expand concepts of mission through participation in the global ministries of the church.

The Vision

Turning faith, hope and love into action on behalf of women, children and youth around the world.

Living the Vision

We provide opportunities and resources to grow spiritually, become more deeply rooted in Christ and put faith into action.

We are organized for growth, with flexible structures leading to effective witness and action.

We equip women and girls around the world to be leaders in communities, agencies, workplaces, governments and churches.

We work for justice through compassionate service and advocacy to change unfair policies and systems.

We provide educational experiences that lead to personal change in order to transform the world.

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Introduction

Welcome to the Leader’s Guide to *Finding Peace in an Anxious World* a study that was co-written by a team of pastors at Urban Village Church, a United Methodist–affiliated church plant in Chicago. This study is designed to explore the ways in which spiritual disciplines can help combat the anxieties that plague us every day.

Finding Peace in an Anxious World is framed by “The Serenity Prayer.” Written by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr against the backdrop of two world wars and the Great Depression, “The Serenity Prayer” is also well known for its use in Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step recovery programs. While longer versions of the prayer exist, this study centers around the commonly known short version below:

*God, Grant me the Serenity
To accept the things I cannot change
Courage to change the things I can
And Wisdom to know the difference¹*

Using this prayer as a guide, we will explore serenity, acceptance, courage, and wisdom, alongside spiritual techniques such as breath prayer, the Welcoming Prayer, and the Examen, to combat anxiety and find the peace which surpasses all understanding.

Since its founding in 2009, Urban Village Church has been a congregation committed to seeking justice in times of uncertainty—not unlike the times in which Niebuhr wrote this prayer. The longer version of the prayer, as recorded by Niebuhr’s daughter, Elisabeth Sifton, reads:

*God, grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change;
Courage to change the things I can;
And the wisdom to know the difference.*

*Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world
As it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right
If I surrender to His Will;
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life
And supremely happy with Him
Forever and ever in the next.
Amen.²*

This fuller version of “The Serenity Prayer” inspires hope that God is working toward justice in this world, even when it does not feel that way. “Niebuhr’s unique position allowed him to see that humans were capable of doing the work of pulling God’s good future into their present as they are restored to a right relationship with God through Christ” (*Finding Peace in an Anxious World*, 7). He believed humans could work to bring about the reign of God in the here and now. The prayer does not deny that anxiety exists or that it is powerful, but instead encourages us to place our trust in God. This is a prayer for times of uncertainty, for feelings of anxiety, for moments of fear; it is both a soothing balm and a weapon of resistance. Niebuhr, writing while the world was at war, reminds us to trust in God’s power to work toward good in a place filled with chaos—and encourages us to participate in that good work for God’s kingdom.

During the study, participants will work extensively with the shorter version of the prayer. The longer one is included here for background and because of its rich theological themes. You may wish to also share it with your group.

How to Use This Guide

This guide was designed primarily for use at Mission u, where studies most often take place in four sessions of two hours each. However, there is flexibility with this design so it can be adapted for other settings. Each session is designed to last for two hours, with a short ten- to fifteen-minute break in the middle. Please adapt this study to fit your context. For example, if you are doing the study in one-hour sessions—perhaps for a unit meeting or Sunday school class—use the closing ritual instead of taking a break as you would for a two-hour session. The next time you meet, you can do the second half of the session and use the same opening and closing rituals to frame the activities.

Preparation

As you prepare to lead this study, please read this study guide and the text carefully. If you are becoming certified to teach this study at the conference level, you will need to complete the certification requirements and participate in training. Please speak to your Mission u dean if you have any questions about this process.

This study provides a wonderful opportunity to learn about and practice different types of prayer that may be new or unfamiliar to you. As you read through each chapter, try the suggested spiritual disciplines in your own prayer life.

Each session focuses on one line of “The Serenity Prayer.” As participants move through the prayer, a number of activities will invite you to add thoughts and definitions to pieces of poster board or newsprint. We encourage you to display these on a wall or table in your classroom to create a “gallery of ideas” that will serve as a physical record of the journey the group has taken together.

In the very last activity, which serves as synthesis and review, invite participants to return to each of the posters to reread them, take a photo, or make notes. By looking back over the work you have done together, the entire group will add depth to your understanding of “The Serenity Prayer.”

A note on anxiety: This study deals heavily with anxiety—the common emotional response that many experience daily in reaction to adverse events. The methods suggested here are not meant to combat clinical anxiety, a medical condition that is best addressed by doctors and therapists. It is important as a leader to be aware of this distinction. You may have compassionate listeners available at your Mission u event; check with the dean or organizer to find out who is serving in that role and share with participants that this is a resource that is available to them.

Supplies

As you prepare to lead this study, you will want to have a copy of *Finding Peace in an Anxious World*, a Bible (references in this guide use the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted), a journal, and pen or pencil. It is also helpful if participants bring these same items for their own use. Activity-specific items you will need are noted at the beginning of each session.

Supplies needed for all sessions:

- A way to display items at the front of the room (PowerPoint, projector, dry erase board)
- Chosen background music (CD or playlist on computer, smartphone, etc.)
- The United Methodist Hymnal, The Faith We Sing, or other music for chosen songs
Note: We have permission to photocopy or project suggested songs during Mission u. If you choose other songs, you will need to secure permission.
- Poster board or newsprint
- Pens, pencils, and markers
- Tape or other Mission u–approved items to hang notes on the wall

Supplies needed for Session 1:

- Art supplies (markers, crayons, construction paper, old magazines, scissors, glue, stickers)
- Poster boards or newsprint (at least three sheets)

Supplies needed for Session 2:

- Art supplies (markers, crayons, construction paper, old magazines, scissors, glue, stickers)
- Newsprint or poster board (one sheet per every four to five participants)

Supplies needed for Session 3:

- Index cards or sticky notes (at least one per participant)
- Poster board or newsprint (at least one sheet)
- Hourglass or timer (optional)

Supplies needed for Session 4:

- Poster board or newsprint (at least one sheet)

Setting the Scene

As you set up your classroom, consider the ways in which the space can reflect our search for serenity and inner peace. Create an altar space with objects that reflect this intention: cloth in soothing blue, gray, or green tones; battery-operated candles; a United Methodist Women Bible opened to Proverbs; perhaps a small vase of lavender; and an image of a dove to represent the Holy Spirit.

During the study, you may invite participants to bring their own prayers to the altar (intentions written on small pieces of paper) and encourage the group to pray for one another. You could also add to the altar space throughout the study, including the card with the words of the Examen after the first session, the finger labyrinth after the fourth session, and so on.

Creating a Group Covenant

In the first session, there is time set aside to create a group covenant. This is an agreement that will govern behavior and norms during your study together. It is important to give participants time to create this covenant together. It will ensure that participants are familiar with what they expect from each other, and it will also serve as a guideline that you can return to if discussion becomes harmful or inappropriate. Some rules that are commonly used for group covenants are listed below. You may wish to begin the discussion by posting some of these basic guidelines on a whiteboard or newsprint and encourage participants to build upon them, recording any additions or amendments. When the discussion has run its course, ask the entire group to verbally indicate that they are comfortable with the covenant. You may also ask each person to sign it.

Common guidelines for group covenant:

- **Listen first:** Focus on truly hearing what your neighbor is saying rather than immediately thinking about your own response.
- **Step up/step back:** Pay attention to whose voices are being heard. If you find yourself speaking several times in a session, consider stepping back; on the other hand, if you are a more reserved person consider whether you should step up and share something that may be helpful for the group.
- **Confidentiality:** Don't share personal stories outside the group without consent.

Endnotes

1. William V. Pietsch, *The Serenity Prayer Book* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1992), 3.
2. Elisabeth Sifton, *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003).

SESSION 1:

God, grant me the serenity

(Introduction and Chapter 1)

Topic

Serenity

Spiritual Practices

Breath prayer and the Examen

Scripture

Happy are those who find wisdom,
and those who get understanding,
for her income is better than silver,
and her revenue better than gold.
She is more precious than jewels,
and nothing you desire can compare with her.
Long life is in her right hand;
in her left hand are riches and honor.
Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
and all her paths are peace.
She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her;
those who hold her fast are called happy.
—Proverbs 3:13–18

Throughout Proverbs, Wisdom (*hokma* in Hebrew and *sofia* in Greek) is personified as a woman. She “cries out in the street” (Proverbs 1:20) and says “hear, for I will speak noble things” (Proverbs 8:6). In Proverbs 8:22ff, Wisdom tells the reader that she was created “at the first... before the beginning of the earth” (verse 23), and that she was present with the Lord at creation: “I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight” (verse 30).

How does this biblical characterization help you to think about what it means to have wisdom?

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

— Luke 2:41–52

Overview

In this session we will discuss the introduction and Chapter 1 of the study text, alongside the biblical focus texts. The activities will help us to acknowledge anxiety in its various forms and explore spiritual practices that can be used to combat anxiety, specifically breath prayer and the Ignatian Examen.

Supplies

- Poster boards or newsprint (at least three sheets)

Preparation

- Select background music to play as participants arrive.
- Write "anxiety" in large letters on one large sheet of poster board or newsprint.
- Write "serenity" in large letters on one large sheet of poster board or newsprint.
- Prepare to display "The Serenity Prayer" (short version) either in large (poster-size) print or projected on the wall or screen.
- Print and cut out Examen cards (see Appendix) for participants to take with them (optional).

Gathering and Opening Ritual (20 minutes)

Have music playing in the background as participants enter.

Greet participants by saying “peace be with you.” Take a moment to note that this ancient and holy Christian greeting reminds us of the importance of worshiping God together, even in an uncertain world, using the explanation offered in the introduction of the study text:

In moments of uncertainty and anxiety, Jesus offers the wisdom of peace. This is the peace Christian communities around the world have shared for centuries when they shake hands, give a holy hug, and pass the peace of Christ to one another in worship. For some communities, this is understood as a time of “sharing love” or “greeting your neighbor”; they are moments of intentional fellowship to engage with those around you. At Urban Village Church, we pass the peace of Christ every week, deploying the language of peace strategically and purposefully. Sharing the peace of Christ is an opportunity to remind each other that despite the chaos of the world around us, we worship a God who provides wise peace, like a mother hen who gathers her brood of chicks under her wing (Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34). The simple, quotidian acts of shaking hands, exchanging hugs, or offering a high-five take on a new meaning in this ritual of peace passing. It becomes a radical act of intentionally speaking peace into one another’s lives, an act of resistance while we as a community combat the forces of a world that tries to tell us that anxiety and fear are the norm. Scriptures like the story of Jesus offering peace to disciples helps us understand how anxiety presents itself and how we as disciples of Jesus can respond if we use a little bit of imagination when reading these stories (*Finding Peace in an Anxious World*, 6).

Read or ask for a volunteer to read Proverbs 3:13–18. Then read and discuss the boxed commentary and discussion question that appears on the first page of this session.

Invite participants to join you in a breath prayer, focusing on breathing in and out with a particular phrase in mind. Use a word or phrase from the scripture passage, such as “peace” or “tree of life.”

After the breath prayer, briefly explain the practice using the section titled “Increasing Serenity” in Chapter 1 of the study text. Ask participants how they experienced this practice.

Note that the group will be exploring many spiritual disciplines during our time together, some of which may be new. Tell them these tools can be incorporated into your life each day as ways to become closer to God, grow in wisdom, and move toward peace.

Creating Covenant Community (10 minutes)

Lead the group in introductions. Begin with a simple check-in from each person: What’s one word that describes how you are feeling as you begin this learning journey together? Consider doing a

second round and asking each person a slightly longer question to which they can answer with a one-sentence intention. Suggested questions could be “What brings me here?” or “How would I like to grow through this study?”

Note that by identifying that intention to ourselves first and then sharing with others, we begin to support each other and form community as we prepare to learn and grow.

Create a group covenant using the instructions and guidelines shared in the introduction of this Leader’s Guide. This will guide your conversation as you move through the study.

Learning Activity: Anxiety in Scripture (25 minutes)

In this activity, participants will explore Luke 2:41–52, in which Jesus is lost and his parents find him teaching in the temple, using a skit or monologue.

Read Luke 2:41–52 out loud.

It has been three whole days since you, Mary or Joseph, have seen Jesus. Three whole days of searching and he has not been found! As his parent, what does your internal dialogue sound like? What do you say to yourself as a parent? What do you think the community thinks of you? What about little Jesus do you worry about?

Work in pairs or small groups to write Mary or Joseph’s monologue. Groups can cast members to be their Mary and Joseph. (Allow 10–12 minutes for this activity.)

Then, for another 10–12 minutes, invite a few Marys or Josephs to share their monologue in character with the whole group.

Discuss as a large group: How does worry or anxiety show up in Mary and Joseph?

Break (10–15 minutes)

Learning Activity: Defining Anxiety and Serenity (15 minutes)

In this activity, participants will have the opportunity to explore as a group how they experience anxiety or serenity.

Ask: “How do you experience anxiety?” Invite participants to quickly journal for 30–60 seconds.

Then ask: “What about serenity? What does serenity feel like to you?” Again, invite a short time of journaling.

Explain that we will be exploring how we might experience anxiety and serenity with each of our senses. Divide the group in half and give one group the poster that reads “anxiety” and the other the poster that reads “serenity.” Invite each group to work toward a definition of their term using their senses. What does anxiety (or serenity) look like? Feel like? Taste like? Smell like? Sound like?

Encourage groups to get creative and artistic in their work and to make sure everyone who wants to has the opportunity to share their thoughts. They can draw pictures or cut out images from magazines to help illustrate their assigned word. If discussion stalls, participants may wish to refer back to either the study text or the Bible passage from earlier in the session.

After 5–7 minutes of work in their groups, invite each group to give a brief (2-minute) explanation of how they described their word. Display the posters prominently on opposite walls or on a table on one side of the room. We will add to this “gallery” throughout the study.

Learning Activity: Introducing the Study Text (15 minutes)

Project “The Serenity Prayer” either on the screen or post it in large print on the wall.

Set the scene by reviewing the introduction and purpose of the study text (*Urban Village Church, Chicago, summer 2015*) along with main themes (*Proverbs, anxiety, prayer, community*).

Invite participants to share their thoughts on the introduction and Chapter 1 of *Finding Peace in an Anxious World*. Possible themes that may emerge include defining anxiety, clinical anxiety, anxiety exacerbated by systemic injustice, the power of prayer, and the importance of community.

Bring attention to “The Serenity Prayer.” Invite participants to share their experiences with “The Serenity Prayer” or times they have prayed this prayer. Note that we will be discussing the power of prayer and various prayer practices that we all can use to fight anxiety throughout the study.

Learning Activity: Examining with Serenity (15 minutes)

Introduce the concept of the Examen as described in the text. Invite someone (or a few people) to read out loud the section titled “Spiritual Practice: The Examen,” below:

The Examen is a daily spiritual practice commended by the sixteenth-century priest and spiritual guide St. Ignatius of Loyola. It encourages us to reflect on the content of our daily life, much the way Proverbs does. In so doing, the Examen helps us to become ever more present to the now moment in which we live and what it might have to offer us. It can be particularly helpful to reduce the power of anxiety and identify and increase God’s serenity in our lives.

To do the Examen, sit down at the end of each day and think through what has happened, looking for places where you particularly felt the presence or absence of God.

Some people describe it as sitting down on the couch with Jesus to tell him about your day. This review of the day can be done in your mind, written in a journal, or spoken aloud, depending on what feels most comfortable and fruitful for you.

The hope in engaging in this kind of daily thoughtful and prayerful review is that you might become more sensitive to where the Holy Spirit is moving in your life and to your own spiritual ups and downs. Naming the places in which you are close to God, or close to the person you want to be, is a way to notice patterns and see if those moments can become more frequent and more joyful. Naming places of absence is a way to invite God into them and see what other patterns (like anxiety) might be leading you away from God's peace and holiness (*Finding Peace in an Anxious World*, 29).

Ask pairs of questions, as described in *Finding Peace in an Anxious World* (in the "Review" section under "Examen for Individuals," pages 30–31). Give a short amount of time after each question to allow for reflection and invite participants to jot down their thoughts. Afterward, repeat the questions and invite popcorn-style quick responses (of course, there is no pressure for every person to share). It might be helpful to have an "assistant" noting answers and themes on newsprint.

Below are some questions that may be used.

- What brings peace? What brings anxiety?
- When do you feel close to God? When do you feel far from God?
- When do you feel community? When do you feel alone?

Discussion

Referring to "Examen for Individuals" in Chapter 1, discuss the goal of examining your relationships with God and others. Was this helpful? Is it something that participants already do, or if not, would they be interested in incorporating it into their prayer life? Bring out themes from the shared reflections, if possible.

How does prayer help us find serenity in an anxious world? Are there specific ways of praying that make participants feel particularly close to God?

Closing Ritual (10 minutes)

Read the following litany, based on Proverbs 3:13–18:

Left: Blessed are those who find wisdom!

Right: *Blessed are those who gain understanding!*

Left: Wisdom is more profitable than silver, and yields better returns than gold.

Right: *Wisdom is more precious than rubies, above any desire.*

Left: Wisdom brings all good things.

Right: *Wisdom brings peace and life.*

Left: Blessed are those who find wisdom!

Right: Blessed are those who gain understanding!

Invite participants to center themselves and assume a posture of prayer. Lead them in the Examen, offering 30–60 seconds of silence between each question. Each line of this prayer follows the movements noted on pages 30–31 of the study text, as summarized in the italicized text below. Do not read the italicized text out loud.

Invite God in

We come into your presence, oh God, with gratitude.

Gratitude

We look back over our day. What are we thankful for in this moment?

Review

When did we feel especially close to God today?

Review

When did God feel far away today?

In God's hands

Thank you, God, for your presence in our lives. We give everything that we have considered today into your hands, letting go of worry or pride and readying ourselves for another day. We pray that we will go into the next day with the wisdom and serenity that comes from you. Amen.

Thank participants and provide details on the next session. Invite them to take their personal Examen cards with them as they leave, so that they can continue this practice if desired. Briefly remind participants to review Chapter 2 before the next session.

SESSION 2:

To accept the things I cannot change

(Chapter 2)

Topic

Acceptance

Spiritual Practices

Praising in song and Welcoming Prayer

Scripture

Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you;
bind them around your neck,
write them on the tablet of your heart.

So you will find favor and good repute
in the sight of God and of people.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.

In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.

Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.

It will be a healing for your flesh
and a refreshment for your body.

—Proverbs 3:3–8

Overview

In this session we will explore the next line of “The Serenity Prayer” by asking ourselves the following questions: How do we “accept the things we cannot change,” particularly as Christians who are called to act for the transformation of the world?

We will also ask: What is “acceptance” in the context of Christian life and practice? How can we practice acceptance in order to reduce anxiety, and how can we move from acceptance to courage?

Supplies

- Variety of art supplies (markers, crayons, construction paper, old magazines, scissors, glue, and stickers)
- Newsprint or poster board (one sheet for every four to five participants)

Preparation

- Bookmark your copy of the study text where appropriate to make it easy to reference during this session.
- Print copies of the handout for this session found in the Appendix and cut the quotes apart so they are ready to distribute to the participants.

Gathering and Opening Ritual (10 minutes)

Read the following prayer: “Called to be Transformed in God’s Likeness,” by Ruth Wills of the Rocky Mountain Conference United Methodist Women:

Constant God, you who never change, morning through night, season upon season, from time before and forever after, help us who are always being called to be transformed and become more like you. Help us to be infused with your light so that we can be points of light in and for this world. Amen (*United Methodist Women Bible*, 18).

Thank you, God, for the transformative power of learning together! As we continue to explore the power of prayer, let us take a few minutes for prayer and praise. What is on your hearts today? (*Invite spontaneous sharing of prayers and praises.*) Amen.

Singing can also be an important spiritual practice—John and Charles Wesley knew that! Let’s sing a song of praise together.

Suggested opening song: “It Is Well with My Soul,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 377

Learning Activity: Written on the Tablet of Your Heart (20 minutes)

Proverbs 3:3 suggests that loyalty and faithfulness should be bound around our necks, written on our hearts. It reminds me of Deuteronomy 6:4–9:

Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The authors of *Finding Peace in an Anxious World* emphasize the everyday wisdom of Proverbs, imagining them written by commonsense ordinary folk and passed down through the generations. What piece of wisdom, or proverb, do you have written on your heart? How was it taught? Perhaps a parent or mentor passed down some particular words of wisdom that have stayed with you throughout your life.

Invite participants to create an image or collage about a proverb that guides their life and depicts the story of how it has shaped them using the supplies provided. After they are done, each person will have a chance to share.

Depending on the size of the group, participants can each share briefly about their collages in the large group, or they can share with just one to two other people. If you wish, invite participants to hang up their posters around the room so that others can enjoy them.

Learning Activity: What Is Acceptance? (20 minutes)

Divide participants into groups of four or five people. Direct participants to the section in *Finding Peace in an Anxious World* titled “Accepting Our Limitations: Trusting God,” particularly Brittany Isaac’s anecdote about cicadas that is shared below.

One night, my five-year-old daughter and I were on an evening walk. We walked in silence but were surrounded by the sights and sounds of nature, lightning bugs beginning to signal one another, cicadas rhythmically chanting, and the rustling of leaves. Of course I didn’t notice any of this because I was lost in my thoughts about a future worry that some might call anxiety. “Mama,” Ruby broke the silence. “Sometimes when I have too many ideas in my head, I listen to the cicadas and it calms me down.”

Orienting ourselves toward something bigger than us—the sounds of God’s creation, the numerous stars in the sky, a never-ending view of the ocean—can ground us and remind us that God is to be feared. It may seem strange to use the word *fear* when talking about reducing anxiety, since one definition of fear is to feel anxiety or apprehension on behalf of something. But *fear* is the word that we find in scripture, so instead of throwing it out let’s reclaim it for its intended meaning. To fear the Lord means to have great awe and reverence. It is an act of worship to fear God. It reminds us that human wisdom and knowledge is really only a gift from God—the source of all wisdom and knowledge (*Finding Peace in an Anxious World*, 42–43).

As you read this story, ask participants to think about acceptance. What does little Ruby see (or not see) in this moment? What does the author see (or not see)? What message on acceptance does this story offer us?

After 8–10 minutes, give each group one of the quotes about Christian acceptance from Chapter 2 of the study text, found in the Session 2 handout in the Appendix. Some groups may have the same quote depending on the number of participants.

Ask each small group to discuss the quote they are given. What does this quote say to us? Do we agree with the premise? How does it inform our working definition of acceptance from the larger group?

After a few minutes of discussion, bring the discussion back to the larger group and ask each group to report their thoughts on acceptance and how their opinion was informed by the story about the cicadas and the quote they discussed.

Break (10–15 minutes)

Learning Activity: From Contemplation to Action (25 minutes)

Proverbs frequently mentions following God’s path. In Chapter 2, Brittany Isaac identifies several steps on that path. The first step is moving from a place of anxiety to acceptance. Part of arriving at acceptance means to accept the call of God to work for justice and righteousness. Then, we must also continue on the path from acceptance to courage. Let’s take a moment and visualize that path. (Invite participants to reflect inwardly for up to one minute.)

Note that Isaac also mentions other facets of acceptance, such as fear, trusting in God’s power, and dealing honestly with our limitations. These may be helpful to bring up in discussion; see “The Christian Way of Acceptance” in the study text.

Now, let’s return to our small groups to continue discussing and visualizing that path. Using the provided supplies, invite each group to create a visual representation of what it looks like to follow God’s path on their poster board—journeying from anxiety to acceptance to courage. They can be as creative as they wish, adding pictures, symbols, and words to depict what that path looks like to them.

Encourage participants to reference “The Christian Way of Acceptance” and “Accepting Our Limitations: Trusting God” in Chapter 2.

The following are some suggested questions to jump-start the activity:

- How do we travel this path?
- What do we bring with us in our spiritual tool kit? What spiritual practices or items accompany us on this journey?
- What challenges do we encounter on this path? What challenges us as we move from one step to the next?
- What does it mean to not just passively accept things as they are, but to instead accept the call of God to kin-dom work? (*Please note the use of “kin-dom” in place of the traditional “kingdom.”*)

This term was first coined by Ada María Isasi-Díaz. It emphasizes relationality, community, and equity as the basis of God's reign—just as in Proverbs 2:9.)

Invite each group to briefly describe how they chose to visualize the path of acceptance on their poster, and invite them to add the paths that they've created to your gallery wall, where they can remain as the study continues. (If the Mission u space does not allow you to leave them up, you could take them down at the end of the sessions and re-post them before each session, if you like.)

Step Back and Reflect (5 minutes)

Call for a minute of silence. Ask what has not yet been addressed, or what questions remain. Have another moment of silence, and then invite sharing. Incorporate the answers into the remaining time.

Learning Activity and Closing Ritual: The Power of Prayer (20 minutes)

Introduce the practice of the Welcoming Prayer and explain that it will be both our last learning activity for this session and part of our closing ritual. Share highlights from the Welcoming Prayer as described on pages 46–47 of *Finding Peace in an Anxious World*. Be sure to read through the three stages in detail.

Use the “Questions for Small Groups” at the end of Chapter 2 of the study text to review this practice with the group.

Briefly remind participants to review Chapter 3 before the next session. Close with a song and a prayer.

Suggested closing song: “Be Thou My Vision,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 451

Suggested Prayer

Eternal God, grant us peace in this anxious world. May we trust in you with all of our hearts, and may you bring us insight and refreshment. Help us to practice Christian acceptance of the things we cannot change, and give us the courage to take action when we are called to act. Your ways are ways of righteousness, justice, and equity. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

SESSION 3:

Courage to change the things I can

(Chapter 3)

Topic

Courage

Spiritual Practice

Kataphatic prayer

Scripture

My child, be attentive to my words;
incline your ear to my sayings.
Do not let them escape from your sight;
keep them within your heart.
For they are life to those who find them,
and healing to all their flesh.
—Proverbs 4:20–22

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

—Matthew 14:22–29

Overview

In this session we will explore and define the idea of courage in a Christian framework and consider what is it we need courage to face and where that courage may be found.

Supplies

- Index cards or sticky notes (at least one per participant)
- Poster board or newsprint (at least one sheet)
- Hourglass or timer (optional)

Preparation

- Print Matthew 14:22–29 (see Session 3 handout in Appendix) and cut into strips.
- Watch the video of Brené Brown’s TED Talk “The Power of Vulnerability” online by entering the search phrase “Brene Brown Ted Talk” and make the necessary preparations to share it in the classroom. If this is not possible, an alternate activity is suggested in this session.
- Identify a song to play during a reflective moment.
- Ask for volunteers to read Proverbs 4:20–22 and Matthew 14:22–29.

Gathering and Opening Ritual (10 minutes)

Suggested opening song: “I’m Gonna Live so God Can Use Me,” *The Faith We Sing*, no. 2153

Leader:

How good it is to center down!
To sit quietly and see one’s self pass by!¹

These wise words from the Christian theologian and mystic Howard Thurman remind us of the importance of connecting with God through prayer.

(Invite a volunteer to read Proverbs 4:20–22 before the opening prayer.)

Opening Prayer

Let’s pray together:

God who gives life to all, be with us today as we continue to study your wisdom. Prepare our hearts and minds to work together with each other. Give us courage as we continue to do the holy work of learning. How good it is to center down, and to spend time with you! Amen.

Learning Activity: Exploring and Defining Courage (15 minutes)

How do we move from acceptance to courage?

Read the introduction to Chapter 3, where Christian Coon describes the movie *Inside Out*. What would an anxiety character look like? What would a courage character look like? Are they opposites? How do our emotions work together when it comes to anxiety and courage?

After a few minutes of discussion, invite each person to take a moment and write on an index card or sticky note how they define courage. After one minute, invite them to meet with one other person and discuss their two definitions of courage to find consensus. After 2 or 3 minutes of sharing, invite participants to join with another pair to form a group of four and again discuss the definition of courage. Finally, invite the groups of four to share out to the large group what their thoughts are. Note them on a poster board or newsprint titled “Courage,” and add this to the gallery of ideas that the group is co-creating.

Learning Activity: Courage in the Bible (25 minutes)

In this activity you will work with the passage from Matthew 14 and ask: What does this tell us about courage? Can we connect it with other biblical and historical (and even contemporary) stories?

Before the activity begins, pass out verses to Matthew 14 that were cut from the handout in the Appendix to seven participants who have volunteered to read.

Ask a volunteer to read Matthew 14:22–29 in its entirety:

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

Next invite those who have the pre-printed verses to go ahead and read them, beginning with number one. If time allows, you may wish to redistribute the verses and invite them to be read again, allowing the room to hear the scripture through as many voices as possible.

Discuss

Split into smaller groups of five or six and discuss this passage. Groups may wish to read the passage aloud again.

- What word or phrase stood out to you?
- Did anything inspire you? Trouble you?
- What does this story tell us about courage?
- Does this remind you of any other stories of courage or faithfulness? (These can be biblical, historical, or personal examples.)

After about 15 minutes of discussion, bring the large group back together and invite each group to share briefly.

Break (10–15 minutes)

Learning Activity: Vulnerability and Courage (35 minutes)

Does the description of overfunctioners and underfunctioners in the study text, under the heading “Anxiety and How We Function,” resonate with anyone? The author describes how being an overperformer and withdrawing completely can be ways in which humans respond to feeling anxious. Both overfunctioners and underfunctioners have room to grow!

In the section called “What Is Courage?” Christian Coon discusses how courage is a necessary part of this growth, even though it’s not easy. One sociologist, Brené Brown, “tries to take courage out of the exclusive realm of heroism and into the everyday so that people like you and me can claim courage for ourselves” (*Finding Peace in an Anxious World*, 52). Let’s watch and listen to what Brown has to say about courage and vulnerability.

Stream Brené Brown’s TED Talk “The Power of Vulnerability” (20:05 minutes).

Discuss

The following are suggested questions for your discussion. You do not have to use them all.

- What did you think of this TED Talk?
- In the study text, the chapter author quotes from one of Brown’s books: “Heroics is important and we certainly need heroes, but I think we’ve lost touch with the idea that speaking honestly and openly about who we are, about what we’re feeling, and about our experiences (good and bad) is the definition of courage. Heroics is often about putting our life on the line. Ordinary courage is about putting our *vulnerability* on the line. In today’s world, that’s pretty extraordinary.”² Do you agree with her definition of courage? Is there anything you would add?
- What connections do you see between Brown’s research on vulnerability and the idea of Christian courage?
- Do you see any connections between this conversation and the Bible study from earlier in the passage?

Alternate Activity

If you cannot or do not wish to use the video, explore courage and vulnerability via storytelling. After discussing “Anxiety and How We Function,” explain that we will be storytelling, a practice that not only builds community, but also requires both courage and vulnerability. Stories most often have a beginning, middle, and end, and often a turning point. For example, “Because of this and this, I had to be courageous.”

If participants are not already in a circle, invite them to form one and to take turns telling stories of an experience they had with courage—either in their own life or one they saw in someone else’s. Use an hourglass or timer, if that’s helpful, to give each storyteller 2–3 minutes to share.

Learning Activity: Exploring Christian Courage (10 minutes)

So far today we’ve talked about how we define courage. We’ve explored an example of courage in the Bible: Jesus calling Peter to walk on the water. We also heard how a sociologist defines courage. With that in mind, let’s take the next step and ask: Why do we need courage? Put another way: What is it that God is calling us to have the courage to face?

As United Methodists, and as members of United Methodist Women, we have a long tradition of working toward personal and social holiness. United Methodist Women has four mission priorities: climate justice, maternal and child health, criminalization of communities of color and mass incarceration, and economic inequality. We engage in social action to try to alleviate these pressing problems and improve the lives of women, children, and youth around the world.

What issue do we need courage to address? How do we, like Peter, find the courage to follow Jesus out onto the water? Let’s reflect on these questions. I’ll play some music as we reflect. In the center of the table, you’ll find large sheets of paper and art supplies. If you’re more of a visual thinker, feel free to draw as you reflect on these questions. Together, we’ll create a vision of the courageous kin-dom of God. Now, let’s spend some time in reflection.

While the group reflects, stream your chosen song on your smartphone or laptop. Suggested songs: “Oceans” (Hillsong United), “Give Peace” (The Faith We Sing, no. 2156), or “God of Grace and God of Glory” (The United Methodist Hymnal, no. 577).

As you bring the reflection to a close, ask if anyone would like to share. Invite them to give short answers, popcorn style. Note the themes that come forth.

Closing Ritual (15 minutes)

Tell participants: For our closing ritual, we’ll explore kataphatic prayer. This is described in *Finding Peace in an Anxious World* on pp. 66–67. We’ll explore language as a tool for prayer. We’ll use the example in the book for our reflection. I will make a prompting statement, and we’ll spend about

one minute reflecting silently on it. If you wish, you may journal on your impressions as we move through the reflection.

God is mother. (*Pause.*)

God is not mother. (*Pause.*)

God is not NOT mother. (*Pause.*)

Amen.

How did you experience that practice? You can pray this prayer with any name for God, or any attribute for God—such as Spirit, Abba, Creator, or Redeemer. (*Allow time for discussion.*)

Tell participants that the group will close the session with song and prayer. Ask them to please review Chapter 4 on wisdom before the next session.

Suggested closing song: “I’m Gonna Live so God Can Use Me,” *The Faith We Sing*, no. 2153.

Suggested Prayer

God of many names, we are grateful for this time we spent together. Give us the courage of Peter, to follow where you say “come.” And grant us serenity, acceptance, and wisdom as we move through the world and act for justice. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Endnotes

1. Howard Thurman, “How Good it is to Center Down,” *Meditations of the Heart* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1976), 28.
2. Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2010), 12–13.

SESSION 4:

And the wisdom to know the difference

(Chapter 4)

Topic

Wisdom

Spiritual Practice

Labryinth prayer

Scripture

My child, if you accept my words
and treasure up my commandments within you,
making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding;
if you indeed cry out for insight,
and raise your voice for understanding;
if you seek it like silver,
and search for it as for hidden treasures—
then you will understand the fear of the Lord
and find the knowledge of God.
For the Lord gives wisdom;
from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;
he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
he is a shield to those who walk blamelessly,
guarding the paths of justice
and preserving the way of his faithful ones.
Then you will understand righteousness and justice
and equity, every good path;
for wisdom will come into your heart,
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;
prudence will watch over you;
and understanding will guard you.
—Proverbs 2:1–11

Overview

In this session we will explore what it means to seek after the wisdom of God and examine what elements go into wise living. We will also experience the spiritual practice of trustful wayfinding through a labyrinth walk and review the various practices for alleviating anxiety that we have discussed throughout the study.

Supplies

- Poster board or newsprint (at least one sheet)

Preparation

- Prepare the four tensions for the “Wisdom and the Christian Life” activity, so they are either printed or projected for all to see. Handout is in the Appendix.
- Collect the materials needed for the labyrinth or walking meditation (floor labyrinth, finger labyrinth printouts found in the Appendix, or a plan to walk outside).
- Ask for a volunteer to read Proverbs 2:1–11.

Gathering and Opening Ritual: Body Prayer (10 minutes)

Let’s spend some time centering in our bodies. Please join me in this prayer and participate as you are comfortable. (Note: This prayer can take place either sitting or standing.) We will practice this prayer so that we are familiar with the motions, and then we will repeat it at least once.

Begin by standing or sitting in a comfortable position, with feet about shoulder width and hands at your sides.

Holy God, you call us to lives of courage and wisdom, not lives of anxiety.

Raise both arms above your head.

We raise our hands high, because you ask us to work with willing hands.

Stretch your hands out in front of you, palms up.

We stretch our hands in front of us, because you call us to reach out to those in need.

Bring your hands to your brow, above your eyes, as if searching the distance.

We bring our hands to our brow, that we may face the future without fear.

Slowly bring your hands to your chest, pressed together in the traditional prayer pose.

We move to a posture of centering prayer, because we ask for your wisdom.

Amen.

(Text inspired by Proverbs 31.)

Allow a few minutes to share reactions to that prayer experience. Note that anxiety and wisdom, as well as other qualities that we have discussed, often manifest in the body. What do they feel like? What does it feel like to embody prayer, rather than anxiety?

Learning Activity: What Is Wisdom? (10 minutes)

As Emily McGinley notes in Chapter 4 of the study text, wisdom is a multifaceted quality:

. . . while knowledge and wisdom are close cousins, they are not one and the same. Knowledge—even knowledge about ourselves—is information, at its base level. It is information derived through learning, experiencing, listening, or observing. Knowledge can be accumulated, stacked, and measured, and give us the things we need to make educated decisions. However, knowledge alone is not enough; it must be shepherded carefully and thoughtfully (*Finding Peace in an Anxious World*, 73).

Knowledge, intelligence, and logic are all part of wisdom, but wisdom is more than any of these things. “We are limited in our understanding and knowledge and experience,” the author writes. “Knowledge, intelligence, and logic are important. But there is still something missing that keeps it from passing into the realm of wisdom: morals and compassion. As followers of Jesus, we call this Christian wisdom” (*Finding Peace in an Anxious World*, 73).

Discuss

Think about a time you have sought, or helped someone seek, Christian wisdom. What was that process like? Discuss in pairs or trios.

Learning Activity: Wisdom and the Christian Life (30 minutes)

Invite a volunteer to read Proverbs 2:1–11. Then read the paragraph from the study text that begins “Wisdom exists in a four-fold tension,” found in the section titled “The Christian Response to Anxiety.”

Explain that we will be working in four groups to examine this tension in Biblical wisdom that the author identifies. Depending on your room, the number of participants, and whether people are ready to move, the four groups can be formed by proximity, by counting off, or you can let people choose which tension most appeals to them. Have each group assign a note taker and a reporter.

Ask each group to reread Proverbs 2:1–11 and engage both Chapter 4 of *Finding Peace in an Anxious World* and the passage from Proverbs in their discussion. Do they agree with the statement? How does it present a tension in the walk of Christian discipleship? What does it say about wise living?

After the small groups have had time to discuss, reconvene as a large group and invite a reporter from each group to share what that group discussed. As they share, note key points on a sheet of newsprint that will be added to the gallery wall (if you prefer not to take the notes, invite a volunteer to do so).

Break (10–15 minutes)

Learning Activity: Labyrinth Meditation (25 minutes)

If you are able to visit a nearby labyrinth or create one on the floor of your meeting space, please do so. If these options are not available to you, make copies of the finger labyrinth handout (found in the Appendix) available for each participant. Alternatively, if the location and weather allow, you may wish to lead this as a walking meditation instead, adjusting the instructions and prompts as appropriate. Read more about walking meditation on The Upper Room website: upperroom.org/resources/walking-prayer.

Summarize the “trustful wayfinding” described on page 87 of the study text. Note the connectedness among all Christians that McGinley identifies, along with the journey of trust that is part of following the way of Jesus.

Then, read the “Labyrinth Meditation for Individuals” section. Offer the three stages of this spiritual practice and additional ideas from the text, displayed at the front of the room or on handouts. Play some calming spiritual music (Taizé chants would be appropriate) and invite participants to physically walk if you are at a physical labyrinth, or mentally walk using the handout by tracing the labyrinth with your finger, for 10 minutes.

Discuss

Bring the walking to a close with a gentle one-minute reminder and closing statement. Then, invite discussion from the group. Depending on the size and energy of the group, this may take place in pairs, small groups, or as a large group.

- What was walking a labyrinth like for you?
- Have you had an experience like this before?
- What did you discover about prayer during your labyrinth walk? How does this resonate (or not resonate) with your previous understanding of prayer?

Learning Activity: Review and Moving to Action (15 minutes)

Transition to a larger discussion about prayer. Take a moment to review the various spiritual practices we have covered during this study:

- Breath prayer
- Examen
- Praising in song
- Welcoming Prayer
- Kataphatic prayer
- Body prayer
- Labyrinth walking/walking meditation

Discussion

Spend 5 minutes discussing the following:

- How can practices like these help us to combat anxiety and center on God?
- Which practice resonated the most for you?
- What other “tools” do you use in prayer?

Then, shift discussion to “The Serenity Prayer” for another 5 minutes.

- Do you look at the prayer any differently, now that you have examined it so closely?
- What challenged or surprised you most about the prayer?

Next, invite participants to take a moment to step back from conversation and consider:

What action is God calling us to do, here and now, for the transformation of the world? For example, “I am called to explore scripture in a deeper way by adding the Welcoming Prayer to my prayer life.” Or “I am called to take action to address economic inequality.” Take one to two minutes to consider this call to action and write it down in your journals.

In the remaining time, invite those who wish to share what they have discerned as their “next most faithful step” in following God’s call.

Closing Ritual (10 minutes)

Thank you for your openness and willingness to share today and throughout these sessions. Let us close with a litany and song.

One: Sometimes we are anxious, God. We long for your peace.

All: God, grant us wisdom.

One: God, we ask that we might have the serenity of Jesus when he was in the temple, knowing that he was in his father’s house.

All: God, grant us wisdom.

One: God, we know that we must trust in you, even when it is difficult. Let us practice acceptance. And God, we also ask for courage, knowing that we will be called to act.

All: God, grant us wisdom.

One: May we go forth with the power of your Spirit, ready to work for justice; ready to put faith, hope, and love into action.

All: Amen.

Closing Song

Suggestions:

“Leaning on the Everlasting Arms,” *The United Methodist Hymnal*, no. 133

“God Is Here Today/Dios Está Aquí,” *The Faith We Sing*, no. 2049

Optional Supplementary Activity

If you need to incorporate a different activity in any session, consider making prayer beads with the group. Materials required include beads of various sizes, wire or thread, and scissors or wire cutters.

Prayer beads are an ancient tradition of the church that many use as a tool to prompt prayer and enhance prayer focus. Below are three sources for more information about prayer beads, particularly in the Methodist tradition.

- prayerworksstudio.com/prayer-beads/make-your-own
- beadisciple.com/blog/a-new-old-tool-for-prayer
- umc.org/en/content/prayer-beads-for-united-methodists

Appendix: Study Handouts

Session 1: Examen Cards



Invite God in
We come into your presence,
oh God, with gratitude.

Gratitude
We look back over our day.
What are we thankful for in this moment?

Review
When did we feel especially close to God today?

Review
When did God feel far away today?

In God's hands
Thank you, God, for your presence in our lives. We give everything that we have considered today into your hands, letting go of worry or pride and readying ourselves for another day. We pray that we will go into the next day with the wisdom and serenity that comes from you. Amen.

Invite God in
We come into your presence,
oh God, with gratitude.

Gratitude
We look back over our day.
What are we thankful for in this moment?

Review
When did we feel especially close to God today?

Review
When did God feel far away today?

In God's hands
Thank you, God, for your presence in our lives. We give everything that we have considered today into your hands, letting go of worry or pride and readying ourselves for another day. We pray that we will go into the next day with the wisdom and serenity that comes from you. Amen.

Session 2: What Is Acceptance? Handout



“Many people think that acceptance is a passive, doormat stance. . . . But, acceptance is much deeper and more spiritually active than a stance of resignation. Acceptance allows us to see the world, ourselves, and our loved ones as they really are” (*Finding Peace in an Anxious World*, 36).

“The prayer cannot begin with ourselves and our ability to control things. That is a self-centered prayer. The first step has to be about serenity and acceptance. These two actions ground us in the idea that something bigger—God, God’s creation, and God’s sovereignty—is at play” (*Finding Peace in an Anxious World*, 35).

“There are reasons why many people have rejected the practice of this kind of acceptance in their spiritual lives. For one, it can be very hard to give up control of a situation that we desperately want to turn out differently. Another significant reason is that this line of reasoning has been used to excuse harm after harm in the name of God” (*Finding Peace in an Anxious World*, 37).

“Acceptance can be an extraordinary gift for several reasons. First, it is actually quite impossible to change everything that we cannot accept. Accepting the things we cannot change releases us from the anxiety of living in a false reality” (*Finding Peace in an Anxious World*, 39).

Session 3: Courage in the Bible Handout

Bible verses are from Matthew 4:22–29.



1. Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds.
2. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them.
3. And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.
4. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear.
5. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”
6. Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.”
7. So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

Session 4: Wisdom and the Christian Life Handout



1. Christians work for wisdom, but it is God who grants wisdom.

2. Christians build a tolerance for disappointment, but maintain determined hope.

3. Wisdom is a practice in which we participate, but it is a gift granted by God.

4. Wisdom does not do away with anxiety, but provides tools to manage anxiety.

Session 4: Finger Labyrinth



About the Author

Olivia DiAgostino is the transformation program coordinator at United Methodist Women, where she works on Mission u and other education and leadership development programs. A recent graduate of Drew Theological School, her interests include biblical study, church history, and the ways in which theology informs educational practice. She is active in her local United Methodist church, and can often be found there cooking for a crowd on Sunday evenings with her partner.