



Faith

IN THE MIDST OF COMMUNITY DISASTER

BY
REV. JOAN LEROY ABELL



A BIBLE STUDY ON DISASTER PREPAREDNESS



**PRESBYTERIAN
DISASTER ASSISTANCE**

OUT OF CHAOS, HOPE





Faith

IN THE MIDST OF COMMUNITY DISASTER

Overview OF THE BIBLE STUDY

A disaster is any event that threatens our security and our daily lives. What is disastrous for one person may differ for another. In this study, we will not focus on individual disasters but on the communal disaster that disrupts a larger group of people. A disaster may be caused by natural forces, human error, or evil events. We will consider the effects of fear, the roles of faith and community, and a faithful response to rebuilding people's lives. It is our faith that informs how we deal with disaster. Our faith not only strengthens us and gives us hope; it also shapes how we help others rebuild and experience that hope. We are often empowered when we share our fears within the context of community. As a leader, it is important to be sensitive and supportive but not to avoid the emotion that may be stirred in the participants. This study is designed for churches, sessions, disaster planning committees, and presbyteries. Portions of it may be helpful for individuals experiencing personal tragedy.





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Session 1

A Response of Fear

Preparing for the Session

- Read through the session to choose activities that fit your time frame and particular group.
- Gather pictures of a variety of disasters (such as the attack on the World Trade Center, the Deepwater oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the nuclear disaster in Japan, and earthquakes, fires, tornados, and accidents).
- Prepare a worship space with a small table and a candle.

Supplies

- Bibles
- Pictures of a variety of disasters
- Notebooks and pencils/pens
- Copies of the litany “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (*provided at the end of this session*)
- Candle
- Small table
- Newsprint and markers

Goal of the Session:

Identify the role of fear when facing disaster and discern how faith and preparation can address fear.


Often our reaction to disaster in our lives, whatever form it takes, is one of fear. Fear is a natural emotion that says that our lives at their core are being threatened. If our fear is not addressed, we can make erratic decisions or become isolated from the very people we need. Fear can paralyze us from taking the action necessary to move forward to solutions that address the consequences of the disaster we face.

Opening (20 minutes):

Summarize the overview of the course. Pray the following prayer, or one of your own choosing.

Sustaining God, in the midst of all the difficulties of life, you are our strength and fortress. As we explore the effects of disaster on our lives, give us wisdom and the peace that passes all understanding so that we may move forward courageously. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Hand out the pictures of the various disasters and invite the participants to pass them around in silence. After everyone has had a chance to see the pictures, have the participants complete the following sentence in their notebooks, “In a disaster, I fear . . .” Ask the participants to



form groups of three or four people and share their fears with one another. Invite the groups to summarize the fears and share them with the larger group. Write their responses on a sheet of newsprint. Engage the group in conversation using the following questions:

- What do you think is the origin of these fears? (Possible responses include loss of control, helplessness, the unknown, uncertainty.)
- How does fear affect you?
- When you looked at the pictures, which one affected you the most? Why?

Invite the small groups to discuss the different ways they have dealt with fear in their lives. Ask the groups to share some of their responses with the large group. Write their ideas on the sheet of newsprint.

Exploring (25 minutes):

Tell the group that preparation is one way of minimizing the traumatic effect that any disaster can bring. There are different kinds of preparation specific to natural disasters. The Presbyterian Disaster Assistance website links to the FEMA website ([ready.gov/natural-disasters](https://www.fema.gov/natural-disasters)) to provide information for readiness and preparation for possible natural disasters. Emphasize that individuals identify specific things they would want to preserve if a disaster were pending, such as important papers, vital medicines, and personal treasures.

Invite people to make a list of items (not including human or animal life) that they would want to gather and take from their homes if they had advance warning of a disaster. Explain that they might have less than a half hour to gather the items and that they need to fit in a suitcase or the trunk of a car. After a few minutes, invite participants to share some of the items on their lists so that others may hear and learn things that they may not have thought to include on their lists. Point out that making a list and putting items such as important papers or vital medicines in specific and easy-to-gather places are part of readiness and can help with both immediate needs and long-term recovery after a disaster.

Remind the participants that there are times when despite our preparations, disasters will have a devastating toll on life and property. Explain that as Christians we affirm that this temporal life is not the final chapter, that Easter proclaims that death is the door to a new life that is yet unseen, and that we can address fear through our faith so that we are not overcome by it. Invite the participants to examine a biblical perspective of fear and faith.

Ask for a volunteer to read Matthew 14:27–33 aloud to the group. Point out that fear and faith are polar opposites. To the frightened disciples whose boat was being battered by a storm, Jesus said, “Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid.”

Engage the group in conversation using the following questions:

- What would you do if you were in that boat and the storms of life were about to overtake you?
- What did Peter do, and why do you think he did that?
- What happened to the disciples?
- What does this story say to us about facing fear?

Share, if necessary, that Peter is beckoned to come out of the boat and walk through the fears that surround him because by focusing on Jesus, he will step out of the security of the boat. We may find comfort in this story, understanding that when we address the terror of the waves about us, we may find victory. As soon as Peter allows his fears to take over, however, he begins to sink. He becomes part of the turmoil around him. Even then, Jesus is gracious and reaches out to Peter. Help the participants to examine where our focus is and not be distracted by whether Peter could walk on water. Remind them that when Jesus enters our boat, there is peace, and that when faith is present, fear diminishes.

Responding (5 minutes):

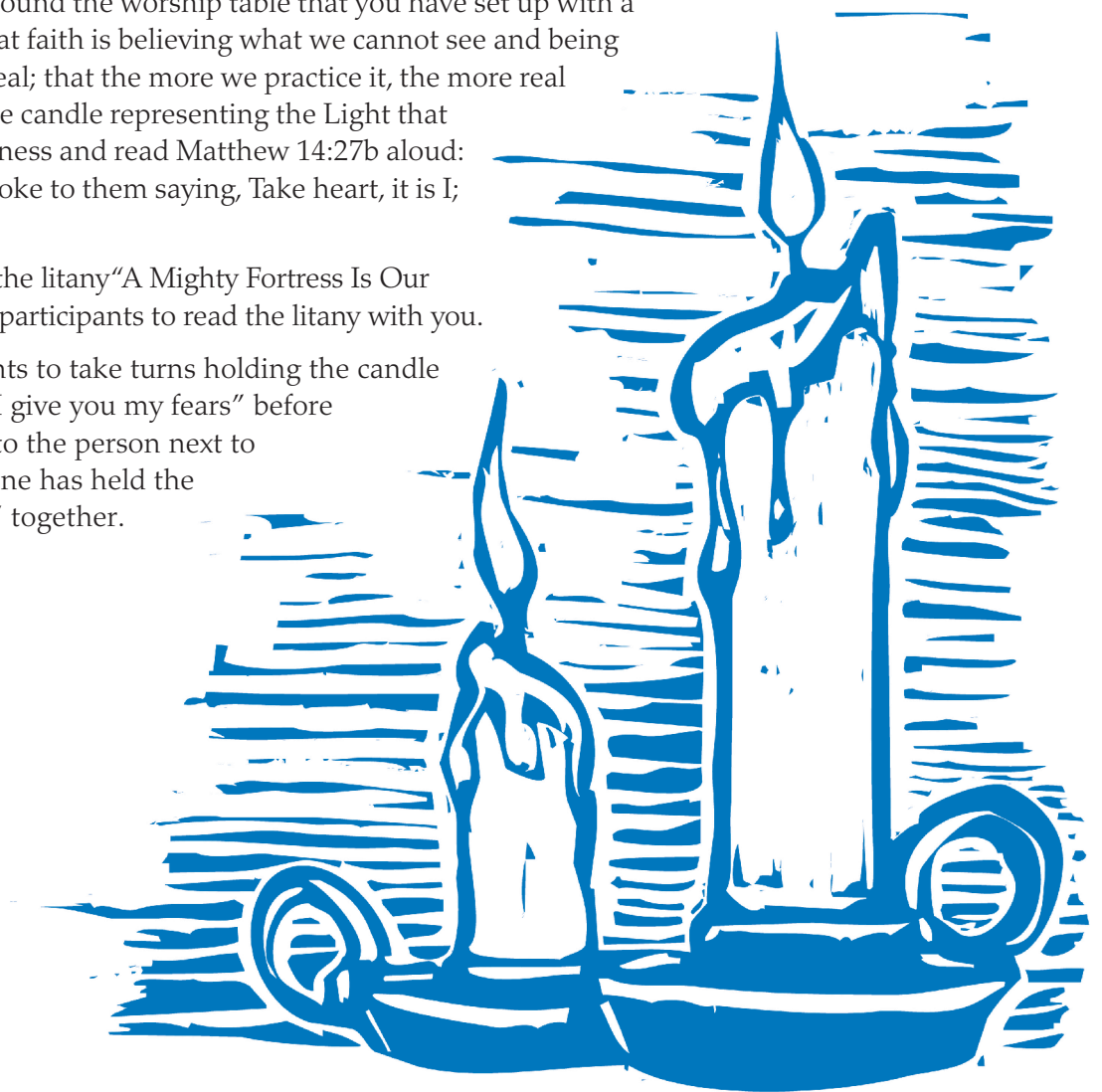
Ask the participants to review the list of fears they wrote in their notebooks. Instruct them to consider what specific preparations they may make to alleviate some of their fears and which fears are out of their control. Invite the participants to share their fears with God by writing a prayer in their notebooks. Suggest that they pray this prayer every night in the coming week.

Closing (10 minutes):

Gather the group around the worship table that you have set up with a candle. Tell them that faith is believing what we cannot see and being surprised that it is real; that the more we practice it, the more real it becomes. Light the candle representing the Light that overcomes the darkness and read Matthew 14:27b aloud: "Immediately he spoke to them saying, Take heart, it is I; have no fear."

Hand out copies of the litany "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" and invite the participants to read the litany with you.

Invite the participants to take turns holding the candle and saying, "Lord, I give you my fears" before passing the candle to the person next to them. When everyone has held the candle, say "Amen" together.



Litany

"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" (Presbyterian Hymnal, 260)
Martin Luther, 1529

Leader: A mighty fortress is our God,

People: a bulwark never failing;

Leader: our helper he amid, the flood of mortal ills prevailing.

People: For still our ancient foe does seek to work us woe;

Leader: his craft and power are great, and armed with cruel hate,

People: on earth is not his equal.

Leader: Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing,

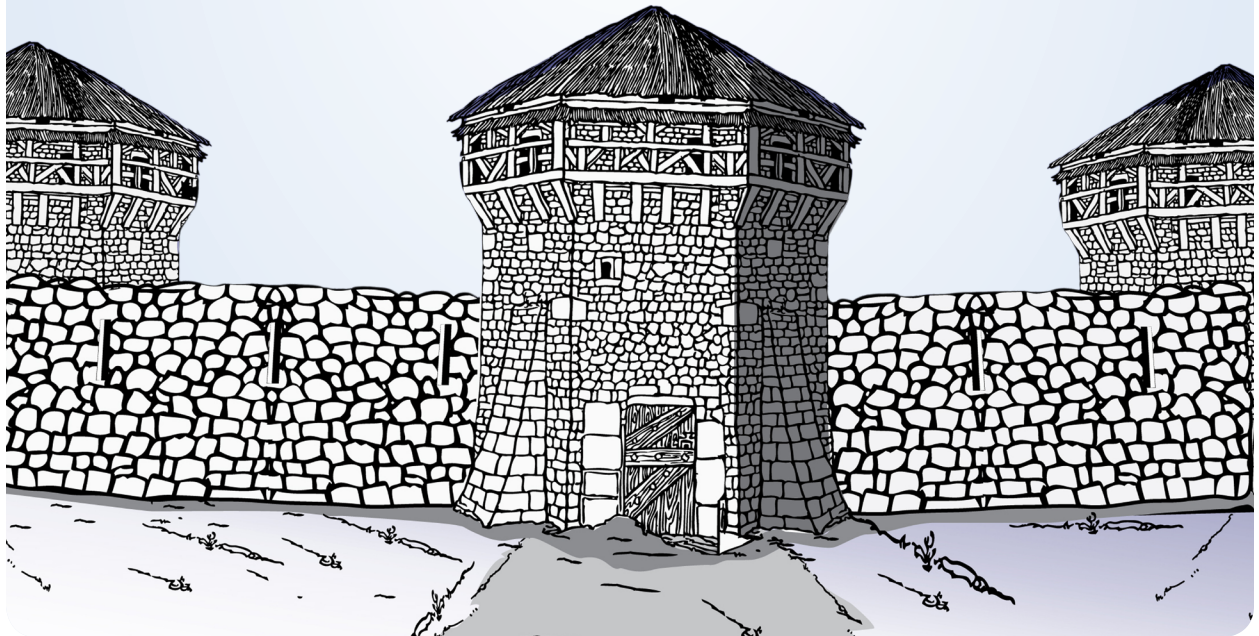
**People: were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's
own choosing.**

Leader: You ask who that may be?

People: Christ Jesus, it is he, Lord Sabaoth his name,

Leader: from age to age the same;

All: and he must win the battle.





Session 2

Rivers of Living Water

Preparing for the Session

- Read through the session.
- Choose activities that fit your time frame and the particular group.

Supplies

- Bibles
- Notebooks and pencils/pens for any new people
- Newsprint and markers
- Bottle of cold water for each person
- Colored pencils and/or watercolor paints (optional)
- Large bowl half full of water
- A hand towel on the small table

Goal of the Session:

Explore how we may be “living water” to people experiencing a disaster.

Opening (15 minutes):

Gather the participants into a circle. Pray the following prayer, or one of your own choosing:

Gracious Lord, you told us that you are the Living Water. If we come to you we shall never hunger, and if we believe in you we shall never thirst. Without you we lose our strength and the ability to serve others. In our prayer and study, be close to us so we may share your gift of living water with the world. Amen.

Invite the participants to close their eyes and imagine the following scene:

You are out in the desert and your car breaks down. The only hope you have of getting help is to walk two miles to the nearest station. It is HOT. Very, very HOT. You start your trip into town already wet with perspiration. The sun is beating down and you realize that you left your hat in the car, but it is too far to go back now. You think about a long, cool drink of water, but it must wait. As you walk, you reminisce about those hot days at camp when you were a youth. You would jump into the cool lake on a sunny afternoon. It felt so good. Or you would climb up to the waterfall and watch as the water trickled over the mossy green rocks. The mist in the air felt good and almost gave you a chill. But back to reality! You are hot and parched and still have a mile to go. Oh, a cold, icy Popsicle would taste good right now. You think about home and wonder if you remembered to turn off the sprinklers before you left. What you wouldn't give to run through those sprinklers like a child at play! Everything here is so dry and brown. Only a few more feet to go, you're so thirsty!

You see the gas station, and more than that, you see a big barrel filled with ice and bottled water.

Pass out bottles of cold water. Ask the group why they think water is such an important Christian symbol.

Exploring (25 minutes):

Tell the group that water is necessary for life. When life is looked for on other planets, the first thing searched is evidence of water being present. It is life-giving. Have the participants open their Bibles and invite a volunteer to read John 7:37–39 aloud to the group. Engage the group in conversation using the following questions:

- What do you think is the meaning of “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water”?
- What do you think these rivers of living water would look like?
- How do you think one acquires these rivers of living water?
- Who do you know that exhibits rivers of living water flowing from them?

Invite the participants to imagine being the kind of person who has rivers of living water flowing from them to bring life, hope, comfort, and peace to each person they encounter. These are gifts that refresh and give vitality to others. The gift of living water comes from the One who is the Living water. To be one who can offer rivers of living water to others, one needs to drink from the well of the One who satisfies. This is nurtured by Bible study, prayer and meditation, worship, and communal activities of the Christian community.

Responding (10 minutes):

Invite the participants to either write or respond visually in their notebooks to the following questions. Make colored pencils and/or watercolor paints available to participants interested in responding visually.

- Where and how do I receive living water?
- How am I living water to others in need?

After a designated time, gather the group together in chairs around a large bowl filled halfway with water. Invite people to share their responses as they feel comfortable.

Closing (5 minutes):

Tell the participants that every day we have the opportunity to remember our baptism in which we are made clean and fresh by God’s gift of new life in Christ. Share that when Martin Luther was feeling really devastated by his failures, he would place his hand in water and then on his head. As he would feel the water drip down his face, he would say, “Martin, remember your baptism.”

Invite the participants to come to the water, cup it in their hands, and let it flow back into the bowl while they silently remember the living water poured out for them and commit to being God’s gift of living water to others. Close with the benediction “The peace of Christ be with you. Amen.”



Session 3

A Lamp to My Feet and a Light to My Path: Meditation

Preparing for the Session

- Read through the session to choose activities that fit your time frame and particular group.
- Obtain a recording of meditative music.

Supplies

- Bibles
- Notebooks and pencils or pens
- Copies of the Prayer of St. Francis litany (provided at the end of Session 3)
- Copies of scripture passages for meditation (provided at the end of Session 3)
- Recording of meditative music and music player
- Newsprint and markers

Goal of the Session:

Learn about meditation and its purpose and have an opportunity to practice it.

When in the midst of crisis or disaster, inner strength may help keep us calm, focused, and hopeful. Meditation is a practice that can provide focus. Learning the practice in non stressful times may provide an inner strength in times of crisis.

Opening (20 minutes):


Pray the following prayer or one of your own choosing.

Your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, Lord. As we meditate upon it, may we find that the darkness is not so dark and experience your presence. Strengthen us and give us the assurance of your peace in the knowledge that you walk beside us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Write the word "meditation" on a sheet of newsprint, and invite the participants to make word associations with it. Write their responses as they give words they associate with meditation. Have them categorize the responses into positive views of meditation (+), negative views of meditation (-), and neutral views of meditation (~). Engage them in a brief conversation about their understanding of meditation using the following questions:

- How would you define meditation?
- What has been your experience with meditation?

Explain that during times of disaster, we need to draw upon our inner strength to deal with some horrible things. Our faith can comfort us and remind us that God is with us in all circumstances. Share with the group that the practice of meditation is a way to grow in faith so that when an unexpected crisis comes, we may have practices to draw upon.



Share some of the following thoughts about meditation:

- Meditation is an ancient practice in the Christian tradition.
- When Jesus most needed strength in times of temptation or fear, he would quote Scripture to guide his response.
- Meditation may provide a time of calm in the midst of a hurried and noisy world filled with frustration.
- There are many paths to meditation, but one common focus: to be still and open oneself to the presence of God.
- Calming the myriad of voices within is a challenge, for our minds tend to wander.
- Repetition of a word or phrase provides focus, and through continued practice we may become what we think.
- Scripture provides a “lamp to our feet and a light to our path” (Psalm 119:105), and using Scripture can be a very powerful method in meditation.

Exploring (15 minutes):

Tell the group that one method of focusing or centering one’s thoughts is to take a Scripture passage or prayer that is meaningful and slowly repeat it over and over. When other thoughts intervene, return to the passage. The aim is to allow the passage to go deep within one’s consciousness and become a part of oneself. It becomes God’s Word written upon one’s heart. The effect is to bring strength and peace to the person. When focusing on God’s Word, fear is released.

Suggest that there are many Scripture passages—even just words or phrases—that can be used for meditation. Hand out the copies of these passages for meditation and ask the group what meaning they may have for someone, particularly in the midst of a crisis.

Invite the participants to select a passage. If they would prefer to choose a passage not on the handouts, they may use their Bibles. Instruct everyone to find a quiet place in the room and slowly and silently repeat their passage. Remind them that if their mind wanders to return to the passage. Tell them they will have five minutes, during which meditative music will play. After five minutes, turn off the music, and quietly ask them to form a circle.

Responding (10 minutes):

Engage the group in conversation reflecting on their experience of meditation using the following questions:

- What was this experience like for you?
- How was it helpful?
- How was it difficult?
- What did you learn about meditation?
- How would meditation be helpful to you in the midst of a disaster?

Share with the group that it is widely recommended that meditation be engaged in for 20 minutes at the beginning or end of the day. The purpose is to become filled with God. One may become “like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prosper” (Psalm 1:3).

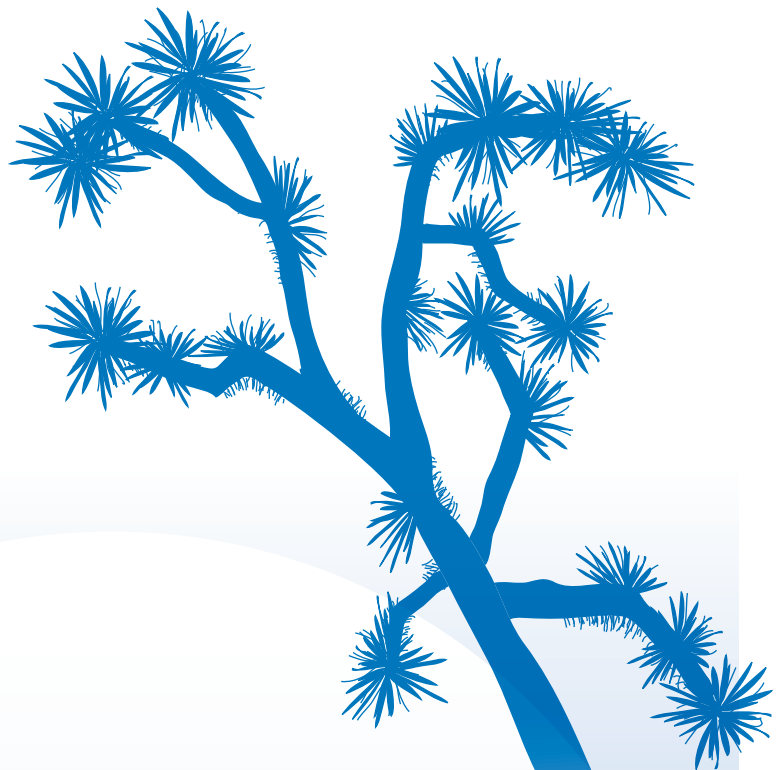
Tell the group about the mantra, another helpful tool for spiritual growth. Explain that it consists of a few words that are repeated over and over and that it is used throughout the day, even before falling asleep at night. The advantage of the mantra is its usefulness in the midst of a crisis to calm our minds. It can be repeated while jogging, sitting at traffic light, or calming frustration in any setting. The value of the mantra is that when repeated often every day, it can go deep into one’s soul and provide a calming presence. Some examples are:

- “He leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul.”
- “Peace, I give you.”
- “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” (This is the ancient prayer known as the Jesus prayer.)

Closing (5 minutes):

Invite the participants to practice meditation with Scripture and with a mantra in the coming week.

Hand out copies of the Prayer of St. Francis litany. Divide the group into a right side and a left side, and invite the participants to pray the prayer antiphonally.





Scripture Passages for Meditation

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.
He leads me in the path of righteousness for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil; for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

~Psalm 23

*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you; not as the world gives do I give to you.
Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.*

~John 14:27

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

~1 John 4:16b

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and
with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.*

~Luke 10:27

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they
shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of
Israel, your Savior.*

~Isaiah 43:1b-3a



Prayer of St. Francis Litany

All: Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.

Right side: Where there is hatred,

Left side: let me sow love.

Right side: Where there is injury,

Left side: pardon.

Right side: Where there is doubt,

Left side: faith.

Right side: Where there is despair,

Left side: hope.

Right side: Where there is darkness,

Left side: light.

Right side: Where there is sadness,

Left side: joy.

All: O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

Right side: to be consoled

Left side: as to console,

Right side: to be understood

Left side: as to understand,

Right side: to be loved

Left side: as to love;

All: For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
It is in dying to self that we are born to eternal life.



Session 4

The Community of Faith

Preparing for the Session

- Read through the session to choose activities that fit your time frame and particular group.
- Write the following prompts on a sheet of newsprint for Opening:
 - For me, the church is _____.
 - When disaster strikes in my life, I need the church to _____.
- Write the following questions on a sheet of newsprint for Exploring:
 - What are the attributes of a Christian described in this passage?
 - How are Christians to relate to others?
 - Why are our differences important?
 - What is the nature and responsibility of the church?

Supplies

- Bibles
- Notebooks and pencils/pens for new people
- Newsprint and markers
- Musical recording of “The Church’s One Foundation” and music player or accompanist
- Hymnbooks or copies of “The Church’s One Foundation” (public domain, available at www.hymnary.org/media/fetch/103020)
- Newsprint with prompts for Opening
- Newsprint with questions for Exploring

Goal of the Session:

Examine the nature of the church and project a possible plan for disaster preparedness.

Opening (15 minutes):

As participants arrive, have the hymn “The Church’s One Foundation” playing. When all have gathered, invite the group to sing the first two verses of the hymn. If you do not have the music or an accompanist, read the verses aloud in unison.

Pray the following prayer, or one of your own choosing that focuses on the church as the body of Christ.

Gracious God, we thank you for your church that witnesses to your love in the world. You called us into community that we might find strength in one another and

**experience your presence. Be our inspiration and guide. May we be faithful disciples.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

Invite the participants to respond in their notebooks to the prompts displayed on the sheet of newsprint. As they share their thoughts, record their responses on a sheet of newsprint.

Tell the group that in a disaster, people will often search out the church to look for meaning and help. The church building may become a communal meeting place, a safe haven, a temporary shelter. In the brokenness, words of Scripture provide comfort, hope, and healing. The importance of the Christian community supporting one another cannot be overemphasized. Building relationships within the community of faith brings stability amid chaos. The friendships and shared faith provide meaning and hope. Nurturing that community on a weekly basis helps it to be a beacon of light for its members and for the community in the event of a disaster.

Exploring (25 minutes):

Divide the participants into six small groups.

Assign each group one of the following Scripture passages:

- Colossians 3:12–17—Life in Christ
- Philippians 2:1–8—Imitators of Christ
- Matthew 5:14–16—Light to the world
- 1 Corinthians 13: 4–7—Love is. . . Romans 12:9–21—The marks of a Christian
- 1 Corinthians 12—The diversity of gifts

Instruct the small groups to read their passages and answer the questions displayed on the sheet of newsprint. After a designated period, invite the participants to share their thoughts. Record them on a sheet of newsprint, they may be valuable for future planning and show people's views of the church. Save these responses for use in Session 5.

Responding (10 minutes):

Invite the participants to consider what has been recorded on the sheets of newsprint and think about what has been said about the Christian community. Ask them what they think it means for a congregation in terms of disaster preparedness. Engage them in conversation about disaster preparedness using the following questions. Then record ideas and responses on a sheet of newsprint to share with the pastor and session about developing a plan for your church.

- What would need to be included in a disaster plan for the church?
- What kind of contact information do members need?
- How would you relate to the presbytery and other churches within the presbytery?
- Which community organizations might you affiliate with to assist in recovery?

Closing:

Invite the participants to say a prayer for your church and community. Close with the Lord's Prayer.



Session 5

The Ministry of Recovery Work

Preparing for the Session

- Read through the session to choose activities that fit your time frame and particular group.
- Gather a small candle for each person. (Candles used for Christmas Eve with holders would work well.)

Supplies

- Bibles
- Notebooks and pencils/pens for new people
- Responses recorded on newsprint from Session 4, and markers
- Christ candle or other large white candle
- Small candle for each person
- Matches
- Small table
- Copies of the *Prayer of St. Francis* (provided at the end of Session 5)

Goal of the Session:

Determine in what ways you can respond to disasters in your community and around the world.

Opening (15 minutes):

The world has experienced many devastating disasters in the last two decades. It is in such times that the world responds as one human family. Cultural, language, political, and religious differences take a back seat as we respond to human need. We readily feel the emotional pain of a parent losing a child, families losing everything, and people having no food or water to survive. We are confronted with the frailty of life. Disasters happen quickly, but physical recovery lasts for many years. Recovery from the emotional pain takes even longer.

In this session, you will use information gathered on the sheets from the Bible study in Session 4, which guides you in a Christian response to people. Having a basic disaster plan formalized with all necessary contact information will help a church move into the recovery phase with expediency and without a lot of frustration.

We are a connectional church. When one part of our body suffers, we are all diminished. This is one of the strengths of the PC(USA) denomination. No one church can do it all. We have resources at the presbytery and the General Assembly through Presbyterian Disaster Assistance to assist us in working out a recovery process.

Pray the following prayer or one of your own choosing:

Comforting shepherd, you lead us through the dark valleys of our lives and restore our souls in the midst of turmoil. We thank you for your tender care and ask that you fill each of us with that same kind of understanding and love as we minister to people devastated by disaster. We pray in the name of our great Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Exploring (25 minutes):

Display the sheets from the Bible study in Session 4 to refer to as the group considers their answers to the questions below.

Share the following scenario with the group, and invite them to imagine themselves in this scenario.

You have just experienced a terrible disaster in your community. You have lost every material thing and have barely escaped with your family. What's more, you have a language barrier with the culture surrounding you.

Engage the group in conversation about the scenario using the following questions. Write their responses on a sheet of newsprint.

- What would you want people to do for you?
- How would you want people to treat you?
- What are your feelings to which you would want people to be sensitive? What may be some biblical principles with which we respond to people in disasters?

Responding (10 minutes):

Share the following information with the participants, and invite conversation about each stage.

The stages of recovery work are:

- Assessment period—What does your group of people need, and what does the community need?
- Responding to immediate physical needs—food, water, and shelter
- Addressing emotional needs—pastoral care, Stephen Ministry care; what will be the ongoing spiritual care?
- Rebuilding structures—Can your church be a hosting site for work teams? Can you form a work team within your congregation to assist others?
- Celebration and reflection

As a church or individuals, discuss which parts of the recovery work folks would like to engage in and who or what committee might spearhead it.

Closing (10 minutes):

Gather the group in a circle. Place the Christ candle or other large candle on a small table in the center of the group. Give each person a small candle and a copy of the Prayer of St. Francis. Light the Christ candle. Say "Jesus is the Light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden."

As you recover or help others to recover, you bring the light of Christ to them. Light your candle from the Christ candle. May he shine brightly within you." Invite the participants to light their candles from the Christ candle. When all have lit their candles, invite the group to pray the Prayer of St. Francis together. Close with the words "Go in peace."

Evaluation of the Bible study

Please take a few minutes and reflect on the following questions:

- What has been most helpful to you in this course?
- What new insights do you have about the role of faith in addressing fear?
- What future direction would you like to take in preparing for a disaster?
- What role would you like to take in responding to the needs of others in the midst of disaster?



Prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

Where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek

To be consoled, as to console;

To be understood as to understand,

To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

It is in dying to self that we are born to eternal life.

