

SMALL GROUP RESOURCES Using the Testimonies

The following pages contain material for those leading discussion groups as part of the series on the Great 50 Days. As group leaders, you know your groups best. Please feel free to adapt the material to suit the needs of your particular group members.

How to use the material:

In this option we have offered a suggested framework for use with your group, which uses the personal testimony for each week as the springboard for your discussions. It offers some ideas for taking action as a group.

The approach is to use the personal stories as the catalyst for your discussions. The stories have been replicated in the group resource. You might simply ask the group what they noticed or what spoke to them in the story. Some potential questions are suggested to help shape the discussion when needed. Each session ends with the opportunity to turn our talk about mission into action.

As with the other option it is important to adapt the material for use with your group. Please also look at the website (www.thegreat50days.org.uk) for more resources & ideas to use with your group.

We hope that you enjoy exploring A Life of Mission together, and that you and your group will be deeply blessed.

WEEK 1 - HOW WAS I CALLED?



Sonia Filmer writes...

Daffodils are my favourite flowers as they bring their boldness and cheer year on year in spring, regardless of how bleak or harsh a winter we have experienced. Early on Easter Sunday (2015), local Churches worked together to place over 1000 daffodils around the village of Lanchester, and left them at the homes of those who were house bound, the local nursing homes and hospice. Each daffodil had a tag on it saying “Easter brings new life, new hope” and an encouragement to “take this daffodil home with you”.

‘The idea sprang from the “yarn bomb” of knitted angels in Tynemouth, and the number of daffodils produced was the result of months of knitting by various groups and individuals in the village. At the same time a Facebook page, “Daffodils of Lanchester”, went live. The response on Facebook was beyond all expectation. The number of people who visited the site went into the thousands and there were some heartfelt messages left. The yarn bomb was also reported in the local paper.

Giving people a handmade daffodil was a new way of sharing a hope-filled message to people in our village. We hoped it would provide them some happiness, whatever situation they found themselves in. It certainly caused a great deal of excitement in the village and by 4pm all the daffodils had been collected. A powerful message of God’s love in our community on this special day.

Questions for group discussion:

- *What excites you about Sonia’s story?*
- *Where are the places you might leave a ‘daffodil’ or other symbol in your community?*
- *Who might see them?*
- *What opportunities can the group envisage for unusual and perhaps non-verbal ways of sharing the gospel message in this locality?*
- *Is there an action you can take this week to initiate one of your ideas?*

Encourage each person to look for a symbol of faith or mission this week and to bring a picture or object along next time which speaks to them of faith, calling or mission...

WEEK 2 - WHICH BIBLE PASSAGES HELP ME TO SHARE MY BELIEFS?



Tom Sterling writes...

In December 2016, a 29-year-old man was murdered. He had been an alcoholic since his teens. One day I had a conversation with him and he said he would be a Christian but he was too embarrassed. So I ask myself: “What is it we Christians do that is so un-cool or toe-curling to non-Christians?” I prayed with Mark on the street that day and kept praying I’d see him again. Nine months later we met and remained in daily contact until a fortnight before he was killed.

Around the same time as Mark turned up, I had an encounter with Gary. He had lived a completely off-the-rails life. He stopped me in my car to tell me he’d been reading the Bible (specifically the parable of the prodigal son). “I’ve been born again”, he said. “That’s wonderful” I said, “have you found a church yet?” He stared at me quizzically and said, “Tom, don’t you know, this is church?” I didn’t debate the point because I was in a hurry, but Mark, Gary and I started to meet on a weekly basis. We called it church. It was the simplest, most distilled, form of church. We didn’t ‘go’ to church, it was about ‘being’ church. All we did was talk about our lives, read the scriptures and pray. So consider this: “Why have we made church so complicated?”

This tiny church is now six or seven people who variously meet on the same basis. We are all, in some way, broken people on a journey, watching out for each other and seeking the truth. Is what we do really church? “Where two or three are gathered in my name” might define church sufficiently. If it does, any of us can do this kind of church. Why not try it?

Questions for group discussion:

(Invite the group to share the symbols, pictures and objects they have brought from last week.)

- *Mark was profoundly influenced by the story of the Prodigal Son. Is there a passage which was crucial for you at a similar pivotal moment on your faith journey?*
- *If you were to choose one Bible passage to share with someone asking you about your faith today which would it be and why?*
- *Tom poses some questions as he retells his experience. Which of these questions do you think is most important?*
- *Would you like to belong to a church where “All [you] did was talk about [y]our lives, read the scriptures and pray”?*
 - *Is there anything you would miss if your fellowship was restricted to these 3 activities?*
 - *What is central to being church for you?*

Tom suggests we are all broken people on a journey. How can we support each other on the journey this week? Encourage each person to think of what would help them and how they could support someone else in the group.

WEEK 3 - WHO HAS GUIDED MY FAITH JOURNEY?



Have you ever thought that God could use three small words to draw someone back to God? That is exactly what happened in my life.

I first made a commitment to follow Jesus on Explorer's Camp when I was 11 years old. From a nominally Christian family there was little support for my new found faith. I continued to attend Sunday School, the school Christian Union and read my Bible for a few days each quarter when I received the latest edition of Keynotes from the youth leader but I didn't grow much spiritually over the next 5 years.

Inwardly I longed to know God's love for me as I had at Camp and persuaded my parents to let me go again. At 16 I was classed as a junior leader which gave the privilege of staying up a bit later. The first night as two of us walked back to the tent one of the leaders, Geoff, called to us: 'Good night girls, God bless you!'

The contrast in the tone and expression in 'God bless you' to the blasphemy I so often heard at school hit me. I laid in my sleeping bag and talked to God about the last 5 years of drifting away from God. There had not been any talks at this point, just three words 'God bless you' was all it took for me to know afresh the love God had for me. Before going to sleep I'd renewed my commitment to follow God - and this time I stuck to it. Little did I know at that time I would end up as a minister.

A postscript to the story is that the summer I was about to enter ministerial training I met Geoff again for the first time in 20 years and was able to tell him the effect the blessing had on my life and where I was heading in September.

We cannot all stand up and preach but we can write in cards or say 'God bless you'. You never know the effect it might have as God does indeed bless the person.

Questions for group discussion:

- *What was special about Geoff's words for Bev?*
- *Are you able to share a moment on your own faith journey when someone said just what was needed to help you to grow closer to God?*
- *Pause to pray in your group for all those who have helped your journeys.*
 - *You might do this in silence, by speaking names, lighting candles or by writing names and placing them around a cross or on a prayer tree.*
- *How easy do you find it to say 'God bless you' to others?*
 - *What might be the impact of saying this instead of 'Goodbye' at the end of a conversation?*
- *Is there someone you could encourage this week? (Bev's story shows that sometimes only simple words are needed to transform a situation.)*
 - *Could the group adopt a 'buddy' system to remind each other before next week?*

WEEK 4 - WHAT IS MY FAITH STORY?



Brenda Wood writes...

Following the Together Weekend at our Church which was a special time for us I was asked to participate in the Great 50 Days. At the time the email arrived I was not in a place where I felt I could write down anything worthy of telling. With the deadline very close I drafted a reply regretting I could not write anything intending to send it today.

It is now 4.30am and I awoke remembering an experience which may be worth telling - probably prompted by reading the wayside pulpit on our Church last night 'Santa Claus comes for one day but Jesus is ALWAYS there every day for you and me'. I have only just taken down the Christmas decorations that includes the wooden nativity scene I bought in Nazareth 20 years ago. Doing this brought to mind the response of my 2 year old granddaughter who had been a little difficult and so was taken to sit on the 'naughty step' for a couple of minutes - she did not like this. Afterwards I noticed that baby Jesus was not in His cradle and asked her if she knew where baby Jesus was - her reply was "He's on the naughty step". This made me smile and have laughed with friends about it but really her reply was a profound illustration. She wanted Jesus to be there on the 'naughty step' as she had been and did not like, and it made me think that Jesus will be with us in any situation in our lives and if we ask Him He will help us to cope and get through them.

It is out of season but it is because of that baby Jesus and the life He lived on earth, experiencing many of the difficulties we have today; His death on the cross for us; His resurrection and promise to be with us every day - surely that is worth repeating at any time of the year.

Questions for group discussion:

- *What is your reaction to sitting Jesus on the naughty step?*
- *Have you ever felt that you don't have a story to tell?*
- *What is the story of this group? (How did it begin? Why does it meet here? How did new people join? Who else could be invited now?)*
- *How can we help one another to tell our stories?*
- *Brenda also told us that she is inspired by a friend who despite many health problems puts her troubles at the foot of the cross and says each day to Jesus "I know there is nothing which will happen today that you and me together cannot cope with" - How might the way we put our faith into practice inspire others?*
- *Is there someone you might listen to this week - who's stories do we need to hear?*

WEEK 5 - HOW DOES MY FAITH SHOW IN MY EVERYDAY LIFE?



Sharon Harbottle writes...

'Would you lead Bible Study on Friday at 5pm?' I was asked at short notice near the end of a busy week of preparing courses, writing devotional material and teaching adults. It is hard for me in French and Creole but I reluctantly agreed. Arriving 15 minutes early, 50 people were already present, all under 40 years old. The numbers swelled to 150 through the devotions. The people were eager, hungry to learn, to share the good things that God had done for them, to memorise the scriptures and apply them in their lives.

As it went dark and people continued to meet using torchlight I was humbled by 2 hours of presentation, small group work, feedback and such singing and praying. Yet it is the same at any training course in which I am involved through the Department of Christian Education, be it training 300 preachers, 250 stewards, Sunday school teachers or evangelists. All want a better understanding of their faith and the printed booklets that accompany such courses. Materially Haitians own so little so a study book, Bible or Hymnbook is precious. Spiritually they are rich but aware that their faith needs deepening and daily growth.

It is hard not to make comparisons with the UK and the little time we invest in Bible study or courses to strengthen our faith, yet whenever we are, lives are changed, people are empowered and society is transformed as the Good News is shared. Phrases like 'Now I understand, I did not know that before, I can now'... are music to a teacher's ears and I thank God that I have been called to use my skills and passion, in Haiti, for these few years.

Questions for group discussion:

- *What skills and passions do you notice Sharon using as she lives out her faith in Haiti?*
- *How are you nurturing and growing your faith week by week?*
- *How might your skills and passions serve your community?*
- *Read together the poem on day 29. It reminds us of many ways in which our lives intertwine with those of others when we are interested in one another. How might the poem challenge and encourage us as we live out our faith?*
- *Is there something we could do as a group to live out our faith here? (Simple acts of blessing include organising a litter pick, buying 'It's Your Move' books for year 6 school leavers, picking up library books for someone housebound?)*

WEEK 6 - WHY DO I SHARE MY FAITH?



From John Wesley's Journal, March 1738:

"Saturday, March 4 – I found my brother at Oxford, recovering from his pleurisy; and with him Peter Bohler; by whom, in the hand of the great God, I was, on Sunday, the fifth, clearly convinced of unbelief, of the want of that faith whereby alone we are saved.

"Immediately it struck into my mind, 'Leave off preaching. How can you preach to others, who have not faith yourself?' I asked Bohler whether he thought I should leave it off or not. He answered, 'By no means'. I asked, 'But what can I preach?' He said, 'Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith'.

"Accordingly, Monday, 6, I began preaching this new doctrine, though my soul started back from the work. The first person to whom I offered salvation by faith alone was a prisoner under sentence of death. His name was Clifford. Peter Bohler had many times desired me to speak to him before. But I could not prevail on myself so to do; being still, as I had been many years, a zealous asserter of the impossibility of a deathbed repentance".

Why a story from John Wesley in the midst of these contemporary experiences? It's reassuring to know that John Wesley, who we many hold in such high esteem in Methodism, had such times of self-doubt and uncertainty in his faith. We are not all preachers, but we can all try to uphold the instruction to 'Share faith until you have it, and then, because you have faith, you will share faith'. No excuses then!

Questions for group discussion:

- *Does it help to know that John Wesley suffered times of great doubt and uncertainty?*
- *Do we need to have the 'answers' to share our faith?*
- *Invite the group to tell each other of a time when sharing your faith has taken you outside your comfort zone (this might be done in pairs or together to suit your group)*
- *Wesley expressed doubt about 'deathbed repentance'.
- Do you think it is ever too late to repent?*
- *Who today might be seen as being beyond salvation?
- Who do we find it difficult to love?*
- *'All need to be saved, All may be saved, All may know themselves saved. All may be saved to the uttermost'. How do you respond to these words which are attributed to Wesley's teaching? (If time allows you could ask the group if there are any other words from the Wesleys which inspire or challenge them - these might be from hymns, sermons or the diaries.)*

Wesley also said *"Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can."* Look for all the opportunities you can this week to do *"all the good you can"*.

WEEK 7 - WHO SHOULD I SHARE JESUS WITH?



I guess for most of us there are people we know and love, whom we have prayed for over many years to come to know the love of God for themselves. At times it's tempting to give up... please don't.

I have prayed for my friend Julie for over 20 years. Julie and I would often have really deep conversations about the world, spirituality and life in general. I love sharing with her - she's a really interesting, perceptive friend. Julie would never describe herself as a Christian, didn't want to go to church, but was always interested to hear about my faith. At times she would challenge me - particularly if I said something she disagreed with!

Last year, Julie encountered God.

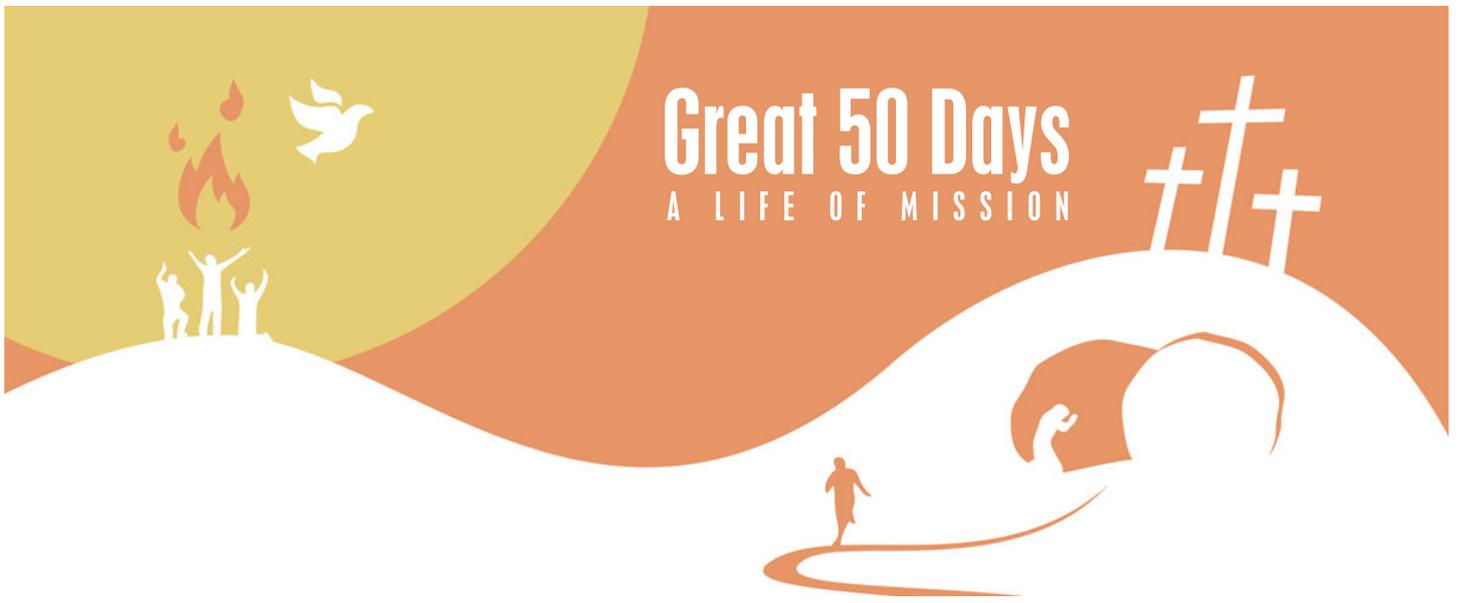
Did this happen in a church service? No. Did this happen as she read one of the books about spirituality that I suggested? No. Did it happen in one of our many conversations? No. God simply, yet oh so profoundly, showed His love to her whilst she was on her own, contemplating life. She might not have the 'churchy' religious language to explain what is happening in her life, but I am without doubt that it is God. And I am so very excited and happy for her.

I'm not saying church and evangelism aren't important... what I am saying is that at the end of the day we need to remember that new birth is God's work. Our job is to faithfully pray and look out for what God is doing and join in. Our job is to take every opportunity to share faith and pray for spiritual enlightenment. If our friends and family members respond to that then praise God! If they don't, then we keep on sharing, we keep on praying, we keep on hoping.

Questions for group discussion:

- *What did you notice in Elaine's story?*
- *How did Elaine express her faith in her relationship with Julie?*
- *What do you think Elaine means when she says that "new birth is God's work?"*
- *Is there anyone you have prayed for over a long period of time? Are you able to share any of the story?*
- *Some of us find it hard to continue to pray when we cannot see a change taking place. What might prompt us to keep on praying? (For some people a physical reminder such as a carefully placed photograph of wristband helps to remind them. Some keep a prayer notebook. For others a regular activity can be the prompt - washing up, waiting at traffic lights...)*

Offer each person a "pocket reminder" to encourage them to pray for someone each day this week. This could be a pebble, a button, a foam cut-out person, a small card. Suggest they write the initials of the person on the reminder and keep it in the pocket of a garment they wear regularly. Whenever you feel it in your pocket hold that person in God's presence.



SPECIAL THANKS TO...

Ian Kent, Tricia Mitchell, Elaine Lindridge and James Patterson for putting this small groups resource together for the Great 50 Days.

Again we hope that you enjoy exploring “A Life of Mission” together, and that you and your group will be deeply blessed as you learn, share and grow together as disciples of Jesus Christ.