



# PRODUCING FRUIT

A BIBLE STUDY FOR  
THE PEOPLE OF  
THE WISCONSIN  
ANNUAL CONFERENCE

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# USING THE *PRODUCING FRUIT* BIBLE STUDY

The following instructions relate to use of the material as a small-group study. Feel free to use this material in the way that best suits your unique context; for example, as the foundation for a preaching series.

If you are preparing to lead or facilitate the *Producing Fruit* Bible study with a small group, here are some suggestions to help make the sessions flow smoothly and provide a “fruitful” experience for everyone.

## **Fruit-Producing Preparation**

Meeting space. Make sure ahead of time that the meeting environment is ready. Have enough chairs? Lighting adequate? Temperature moderate? Have all the supplies you need? A circle is the best arrangement for effective group sharing.

Format. Each of the four sessions may take 60–90 minutes or be split into two church school classes for an eight-week class. Decide on the session format.

Dates, times, and location. Make sure everyone who wishes to attend has clear information on dates, times, and location of the sessions.

Prayer. Each group member begins from a unique stage of faith development, based on unique experiences and insights. Pray for God to work in the lives of everyone in the group.

Read ahead. Make note of the insights and questions you feel are most important. Prepare your responses to the study questions.

## **Fruit-Producing Facilitation**

Keep first things first. Your primary role is to employ the study as a means of grace, helping individuals and the community move toward faithful discipleship.

Silence cell phones. Keep interruptions to a minimum. At the start of each session, ask people to turn off or silence cell phones.

Start on time. Honor the time of those who are on time. If you do this faithfully from the first meeting, people are more likely to arrive on time. Be sure, however, to welcome those who arrive late. It will help them join the group more quickly.

End on time. Regardless of where you are in the session, when the “decided” ending time arrives, give group members the opportunity to leave if they need to. Then wrap up as quickly as you can. Communicate that you value and respect people’s time. Be prepared for people who want to stay and talk at the end. If you need to leave or close the building by a certain time, make this clear during the meeting. Be aware of nursery closing times, if applicable.

## **Fruit-Producing Group Discussion**

Share your enthusiasm. Communicate the value of full participation. This is often best demonstrated in active listening. If you talk most of the time, the group may become passive.

Encourage “safe” participation. While you want everyone to participate, be careful not to put anyone on the spot. Let the group members know that they don’t have to answer questions they are uncomfortable answering. It is always okay to say no or to pass.

Give everyone a voice. Break into smaller groups to discuss some of the questions. This encourages fuller participation—especially for those uncomfortable in a larger group setting.

Silence is okay. Avoid filling silence too quickly. If no one responds after a time, try rephrasing the question and ask it again.

Lead gently. If conversation strays from the session topic, assess the need to gently guide conversation back to the topic or to allow the ongoing conversation to bear fruit of its own.

Don’t worry about being the expert. None of us has all the answers . . . seek together. Allow the Holy Spirit to be in charge. When group members look to you for definitive answers, focus on sharing ideas rather than giving advice. If issues or questions arise that you don’t feel equipped to deal with or answer, invite the class to research them and then share with the group at the next session.

Build trust. Build on the strengths of members present and affirm their responses.

Enjoy the process. Enjoy learning and growing with your group. Trust the Holy Spirit to be at work through your leadership to accomplish God’s purpose in the lives of your group members. Expect surprising discoveries along the way!

# Session 1

## INTRODUCTION

*Galatians 5:13-1; 22-23; 6:1-10*

### Opening Prayer

*Gracious and Loving God, open us now to receive words of wisdom as we discern together the limitless possibilities of your promise to truly awaken to the power of the Holy Spirit. Surround us with the divine experience of your amazing grace as we reach out in love to share in the joy of your abundance. This we ask in the Name of the one we call Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

### Fruit-Producing Disciples

Thank you for engaging in this study with us. Before we start, let's explore some of the key theological concepts and lay a solid foundation for our experience together.

As you will soon experience in the Scripture passages and in sharing this study guide, our God is a God of abundance. From the first creation story in Genesis to the closing passages of Revelation, and almost everywhere in between, we find the promises of the abundance of God. God provides abundant resources, abundant love, abundant grace. For example, God tells old and childless Abram and Sarai (we know them as Abraham and Sarah) that they are the beginning of a great nation. Both are skeptical, Sarai laughs, but in the abundance of God, it happens. In our study, we will discover a God of abundance.

But this is not a study on prosperity. There is no promise that we as individuals will have everything we want. What we will find is God's promise to be with us when we have nothing. It is not an abundance of material blessings that make our lives rich and fulfilled; it is the experience of giving and sharing that brings joy and purpose. This is a study on how we may be partners with God in producing the good fruit described in Scripture.

Our study invites us to be open to exploring the gifts God has given us. God has blessed us with many gifts, and each one of us has giftedness to explore within ourselves and with others. When we learn and develop our gifts, we discover that God opens up new ways and places for us to use our gifts in the world.

One of the key theological concepts we find in our faith experience is the expectation of God that those who believe will live out their faith in the ways they share their lives. One way of expressing this is to find ways to "produce fruit." Together, we expect to learn the fruit of the Spirit that God intends for us to experience and share in community. Only when we share and learn together is it possible for us to produce fruit that feeds our own lives and the world.

In addition to the God of abundance and exploring God's call to us to use our many and various gifts, our study will help participants understand God's call to invite and include others with us on the journey. The study will help us find in God's Word the way to reach out to others not yet on the journey of faith. We might refer to this as moving from our focus on retaining those who are already with us to a focus on recruiting new people, paying particular attention to the diversity of people all around us in our communities and the young people who so often are not engaged with the Church. Living fruit-producing lives can attract others, and we will learn together how to do that. We invite you to ask someone not now connected with the Church to study with you and to build relationships through delving together into God's Word.

Participating in the process of this study will require us to look deep within, and to struggle with questions that are not easy to answer. The study will require us to think about our gifts and how God has gifted us. It is likely that, as a result of this study, participants will deepen their understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and to produce the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our everyday lives and in the life of our congregations.

We are thankful for all those who have invested time and gifts in the preparation and sharing of this study. These people are blessed with many gifts and live as fruit-producing disciples of Jesus Christ. We expect if you engage fully in this study you will be blessed and experience fruitful change.

We believe God calls us, and through this study we find how God prepares us, molds us, invites us, and sends us into the world prepared to live fruit-producing lives so that the world will see and experience the life giving love of God in and through us.

### **Study Questions**

1. What has drawn you to participate in this study? Share with the group your hopes for your participation in this study.
2. Read about the apostle Paul's new understanding of the Law in Galatians 3:1-5. Rather than circumcision, the work of the Holy Spirit justifies us in Christ. What does being justified in Christ mean for you?
3. Read Galatians 5:13-14. No longer under the Law, followers of Christ are led by the Spirit, who enables us to fulfill the law through love. Discuss what loving your neighbor as yourself entails.
4. Read Galatians 5:22-23. In contrast to the many works of the flesh, the Spirit produces *singular* fruit in the justified person, manifested in nine ways. List the nine manifestations of the fruit of the Spirit. Give examples of how you have seen spiritual fruit expressed or lived out by others. How have you expressed/lived out the fruit of the Spirit? How does your congregation express and live out the fruit of the Spirit?

5. Read Galatians 6:1-10, Paul's instructions for living in community. Explore and share what it means for you to "sow to the Spirit" in order to "reap eternal life from the Spirit."
6. What will change in the life/ministry of your congregation if you live the fruit of the Spirit more fully?
7. Name a few people not connected with your church you could ask to study God's Word with you. Brainstorm together, then role-play with a partner ways of inviting another to join this group study or to study the Bible with you in another setting.

### **Closing Prayer**

*Thank you God for reminding us of the many gifts we have to live into a life of discipleship. Guide us to be not only faithful but also fruitful in the midst of your abundance. Help us to dream dreams and not be fearful of living into those dreams. Empower us to glorify your name in ministry to and with the other, serving you as we invite others to journey with us. Come Holy Spirit, prepare our hearts, minds, and souls to be blessed through this study.  
Let it be so, in Jesus' name. Amen.*

## Session 2

# GOD'S ABUNDANCE

*Genesis 1; Exodus 16; 1 Kings 17; Matthew 14*

### Opening Prayer

*Generous and gracious God, we come now to hear and to be reminded of your powerful presence that sustains our lives. We have chosen to embrace the gifts you have given us and the knowledge that you are the source of strength and hope in the world. Awaken us to new understandings of your urgency to share all that you provide as we choose to follow in the knowledge of your love. In the Name of your son Jesus we pray. Amen.*

### God's Abundance

God made humanity and the world. God relates as Creator to the world and humanity. That relationship is all that the creation needs, for God is the source and sustainer of all life, strength, and hope.

God's created and creative abundance is a gift to all and a relationship with all. Abundance is the natural condition of all of creation. It is a God-given mentality and behavior that humans can choose. Author Henri Nouwen offers examples of abundance mentality and behavior:

*"There is enough for everyone, more than enough: food, knowledge, love . . . everything." . . . When we see hungry people, we give them food. . . . [W]hen we encounter people in need of love, we offer them friendship. . . . When we live with this mind-set, we will see the miracle that what we give away multiplies. . . . There will even be many leftovers. (Henri Nouwen in Henri Nouwen Society: Daily Meditation, May 6-7, 2012. See 5/9/12 meditation archive at <http://generositymonk.com>.)*

The Bible demonstrates abundance from the first chapter of Genesis on. Genesis 1 declares God's abundance, generosity, and the blessing and fruitfulness of creation. Exodus 16 displays God's presence and love for God's people through the giving of manna in the wilderness. In 1 Kings 17, Elijah demonstrates God's power to bring rain, food, and life out of death. The feeding of the 5,000 in Matthew 14 underscores God's ability to multiply our available resources until all have more than enough.

Abundance represents God's economy. God gives more than one loaf—enough bread for everyone. God distributes what we need. God's grace and activity is sufficient from beginning to end, from prevenient grace to sanctifying grace. But abundance goes beyond thoughts of having enough or having what is sufficient. Abundance mentality captures God's presence and power, and so it leads us to hope.

## Human Scarcity

In spite of God's glorious abundance, humans deny the gift and choose to live in scarcity. Scarcity is a false condition that says the land and everything with it belongs to people, not to God. Through the lens of scarcity, we see reality as divided and broken up—pieces over which to fight. Choosing to live in a condition of scarcity forms our attitudes, mentality, and behavior.

*[A]s fearful people we are inclined to develop a mind-set that makes us say: "There's not enough food for everyone, so I better be sure I save enough for myself in case of emergency," or . . . "There's not enough love to give to everybody, so I'd better keep my friends for myself to prevent others from taking them away from me." . . . The tragedy, however, is that what you cling to ends up rotting in your hands (ibid.).*

We demonstrate our human condition of scarcity in our focus on winners and losers in sports, business, nations, even church life. We compare what we have with what our neighbors have. We fear we don't or won't have enough money; we hoard out of fear and greed. This is nothing new; the Bible has many examples of scarcity. For example, Genesis 47 shows us a pharaoh fearful that there are not enough goods to go around, so Pharaoh becomes greedy and ruthless, and the Hebrew people eventually become enslaved by the shared condition of scarcity.

Scarcity represents the human economy. If there is one loaf, then everyone must fight for a piece of it. Humans generally fail to distribute fairly what people need. Scarcity mentality then leads to despair. It is a disastrous option we pick every day.

## Choose Abundance

We do not have to select scarcity, however. We have a choice. We can choose God's abundance with all its blessings. The choice is ours:

Scarcity	or	Abundance
Self-Reliance	or	Reliance on God
Materialism	or	Spirituality
Consumerism	or	Generosity
Negativism	or	Positivism
Fear	or	Respect, Curiosity, Love
Secular City	or	God's City
Monoculturalism	or	Multiculturalism
Racism	or	Cultural Competence

Theologian Walter Brueggemann writes that the conflict and choice between abundance and scarcity is our defining problem. This conflict calls us to make a decision, one that dominates our whole lives, says Brueggemann. We can be "torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity." ("The Liturgy of Abundance,

The Myth of Scarcity,” by Walter Brueggemann, *Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999; see <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=533>, accessed February 2013.)

We need to choose abundance—in language, attitude, and behavior. For our own joy and peace, we need to choose sharing over hoarding, generosity over greed, hospitality over selfishness. For the sake of the creation, God calls us to choose wisely and to bring about a positive, cultural change.

This is a matter of choosing a possibility mentality, asking what is possible rather than what is wrong. God has given each of us gifts, promises, and possibilities. We can choose to identify, embrace, and live those, living in personal holiness. God has given also to the Church community many gifts, assets, and strengths. As the Church, we can identify and build on those, living in social holiness. God’s people can transform the Church and the world into what it really is and is meant to be: God’s abundant garden.

We demonstrate God’s abundance in all and for all in practical ways, beginning with language—saying that we can do this thing, or that we can become that, or that we have all the resources we need to be faithful, fruitful. Language can be inclusive, positive, and spiritual, embracing multicultural communities and all communities. Abundance in thought, language, and attitude—these human resources lead us; material and financial resources follow.

Our communities can share human and material gifts and generate enough for all. With positive leadership, it is possible to witness to, nurture, and serve with our neighbors. We can extend our giftedness to all the world, our entire parish, to the land, and everything in it. We can imitate God in hearing and responding to the cry of the needy. We can take what we have—ourselves, our gifts, our witness, our wealth—and share it fully. Through our United Methodist connection, we can give all we can, and then stand amazed at what God will do with us and through us and our gifts.

### **Study Questions**

1. Describe your experience of God’s abundance in your life. Tell someone next to you how God has provided all you need. If you could tell a story or draw a picture of abundance, what would it be?
2. What is your response to the idea that abundance is “the natural condition of all creation” and “God’s economy.” How does this idea fit with your experience? What are your questions? Your concerns?
3. Review the biblical texts on abundance named in the chapter.
  - How are God’s abundance and generosity displayed in Genesis 1?
  - In Exodus 16, what expectations and instructions did God give the people, in conjunction with providing manna? In what way did God test the people?

- In 1 Kings 17, Elijah obeyed the word of God and was rewarded with food in the midst of drought. The widow of Zarephath obeyed the word of God, spoken through Elijah. What abundance did she receive?
- In Matthew 14, Herod's use of power was destructive and defensive. Jesus' power is life-giving and beneficial. Discuss the contrast between Herod's extravagant banquet and Jesus' feeding and healing in this chapter.

What additional stories in Scripture demonstrate God's abundance? How do these passages speak to you?

4. Where does scarcity mentality appear in the Bible? In what ways do you or your congregation choose scarcity over abundance?
5. How do you practice God's abundance as an individual, as a congregation? Make a list of the ways your church will take action based on this learning. Develop a proposal for an outreach or multicultural ministry that reflects a commitment to generosity.

### Closing Prayer

*Loving God we choose to rely on you, not on ourselves or the world. For you, O God, are the ever present source of strength, hope, and love that engages us in relationships with others. Your amazing grace breaks the chain of greed and allows us to open our hearts to be a witness to your limitless possibilities. God, you are the Giver of life, and when you breathe your breath into our being, we become transformers of your world as we move in and out of spaces and places to which you have called us. Through your way, hope abounds.*

*Thank you God for an opportunity to be a part of your generous gift and for all that you have given to us.*

*Forgive us when we forget and sometimes even deny your gift. We want to acknowledge our love for you and never forget that you are always with us, offering yourself in love and providing more than enough.*

*Loving God, we choose you, not ourselves or the world. For you, O God, are the ever present source of strength, hope, and love that makes us one with the world in you. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.*

## Session 3

# RECRUITMENT: GOD’S CALL TO BE A BLESSING AND A LIGHT

*Genesis 12:1-3; Philippians 2:14-18*

### Opening Prayer

*God, as you promised to bless Abram so that he might be a blessing, we cry out from our wilderness of violence, hunger, homelessness, “isms,” and all of the other ills of our world in need of blessing. Please, we beg of you to pour out your Holy Spirit on us so that your light of salvation through Jesus will erase all tears and fears as we walk in your light to be a blessing to others. Surround us with your radiance and guide us to hear whispers of your loving peace. We are here to listen in the noise and in the silence of your word. Speak God. Speak to us now. Let it be so. In the name of Jesus; Amen.*

### The Great Commission of the Old Testament

In Genesis 12:1-3, Abram is the opening player in God’s plan for global mission. God tells Abram to leave his country, and then God promises: “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing . . . and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (NIV). Theologically, this segment is called the “Abrahamic Covenant.” When we look at the text through a missional lens, it can also be called the “Great Commission” of the Old Testament. It is God’s call to Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants, to be blessed and to bless all peoples on earth. The call and promise are repeated three times to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 18:18; 22:18), once to Isaac (26:4) and once to Jacob (28:14-15). The missional idea of God, right from the time of Abraham, was to bless all peoples, all nations, and all races. This is the missional thread of the entire Scripture.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—our God—is interested in blessing all people of all nations and of all races. The words *bless*, *blessing*, and *blessed* appear not only throughout the Christian Scripture; they are part and parcel of all Christians and all Christian churches. We worship the God of blessing, whose plan is twofold or two-sided. God blesses us and, in turn, we are to be a blessing to others. Now, what is a blessing? When I pray “Lord, bless me,” I expect the Lord to give me all the best things in life, for family and ministry. When I say “bless you” to someone, I expect God to give that person all the best things in his or her life. Simply put, blessing is extending God’s love into the lives of others.

God blesses us individually and collectively as a Church for the missional purpose of blessing others. If a church claims to be a blessed faith community through Jesus Christ, then all people, all nations, and all races ought to be blessed by the church. How many of our churches truly claim that blessing in

actively blessing others? People and communities may not look like us; they may not speak the same language; they may not have ever seen stained glass windows, a steeple tower, or a pipe organ; they may not know how to love God and love people. It doesn't matter. The missional thread that connects Jesus' commandment to love God and neighbor through the church with the surrounding community is the joy of God's Great Commission: all peoples, not just one race or one community, are welcomed, embraced, accepted, and celebrated.

Peter Block, author and consultant on community-building, challenged the clergy and laity of The Wisconsin Annual Conference (June 2012) to know not only who our neighbors are, but also their needs and gifts, and to use that knowledge to determine the church's ministries, not the other way around. It's a double blessing to connect people's needs and gifts with the vision and the mission of local churches. This is what the New Testament Great Commission is all about, "Go into all nations . . ." (Matthew 28:18-20). People go into the church to be blessed and go out into the community to be a blessing to people of all ages, nations, and races. This is well-expressed in our Word and Table services, "By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world" (The United Methodist Hymnal, The United Methodist Publishing House [Nashville: 1989]).

### **Lights in and for the World**

In Philippians 2:15b (NKJV™), Paul writes, "you shine as lights in the world," using the plural word "lights" because *Church* is all the people, not just one person. Webster's Dictionary defines the word *shine* as reflect, radiance, glow, bright, and excel. Church people, who are the children of God with a primary function of being the light of the world (see Matthew 5:14), are called to reflect the amazing grace of God, to radiate God's unconditional love, to glow in selfless service to the poor and the needy, to burn bright in active faith, and to excel in the ministry of mission and outreach. You shine as lights to all people in the world, approximately 6.2 billion in communities, people groups, nations, languages, castes, and ethnicities. Paul characterizes those without faith as a "crooked and perverse generation," which can simply mean that people are in darkness and need to be brought into light to become lights of the world. This is the context for recruitment, evangelism, and reaching out. People are going through darkness—sorrow, grief, loss, disappointment, frustration, sickness, and failure; these are opportunities for church people to invite, to embrace, and to accept. We are called to show people "light at the end of tunnel" and to lead them to the light. Jesus met people at the point of their need and focused on their healing in ways that they could rejoin the community.

From the dark prison cell in Rome, Paul challenged the church at Philippi to be a high-powered light, "You, children of God, the Faith Community at Philippi, shine as lights in the world." In other words, the church at Philippi was challenged to go into their community and to ask: "Is someone in this darkness in need of light?" The same challenge and the same question applies to our United Methodist congregations. It is a missional challenge. It is a missional question.

Matthew 5:16 reads: “Let your light shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” It is likely that Paul would have used images from the Sermon on the Mount in his epistles. Jesus preaches, “Let your light shine before others.” Paul writes, “You shine as stars in the world.” In essence, both convey the same message. We who claim to be followers of Jesus are mandated to shine, before and among people, and in the world. Church people shine in three dimensions. *We shine upward*: worshiping God regularly with adoration, confession, exhortation, corporate prayer and songs of praise. *We shine inward*: in small groups, Christian education, fellowship, and building up one another within the faith community. *We shine outward*: taking the gospel of love and justice into the world, to people who are in darkness, looking for help, hope, and healing, to people hungry to become light. The purpose of all three dimensions is to glorify God, to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Let our light shine today, tomorrow and every day!

### Study Questions

1. Name some of the people in your life who have been “blessed to be a blessing” to you. What blessings have you received through them? Name a time you have been “blessed to be a blessing” to others. What blessings have you offered? In what ways has God’s love been extended into your life?
2. Discuss the ministry of your congregation. What is being done to care for those who already are part of your congregation (retention)? What is being done to reach out to people who are not yet connected with a faith community (recruitment)? What is the ratio of retention to recruitment ministries in your congregation?
3. Review Genesis 12:1-3 and Philippians 2:14-18. What do these passages say about God? What do these passages say about humanity and our relationship with God? To what is God calling God’s people?
4. As a group, list the resources (human, material, financial) available to your congregation. Then list known needs in your community. As you compare the lists, consider what needs could be met by engaging/sharing your congregation’s resources. What steps are needed to begin this ministry? In what ways might your congregation gather additional information about your community to further identify the needs of people in your area?
5. Name one new action you, personally, will take in order to “shine outward.”

## **Closing Prayer**

*God you are our Promised Keeper, you have blessed us with your unconditional love and assurance to move beyond ourselves to be witnesses in the world. Let your Holy Spirit continually guide us to be the light of Jesus, helping hands and feet for those who are in need of your grace, justice, and mercy. Help our lips to sing and speak your praises as we honor and worship you with joy and obedience in our service to you. We vow to answer your call to reach out to all people regardless of who they are.*

*And now, with grateful hearts, we will seek to shine the light of Jesus, your redeeming promise of love, hope, and spirit on all who will receive it. Thank you, God, for blessing us so that we can be a blessing to others.  
In the blessed name of Jesus; Amen.*

## Session 4

# THE GIFTS OF ALL GOD'S PEOPLE

*Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4*

### Opening Prayer

*Almighty God, you are the giver of all good and perfect gifts, gifts offered to make us one with you and one with each other. Let us adhere to the Holy Spirit's claim on our lives, as we reach out together in love, building up the body of Christ. We come now, surrendering our lives to you, realizing the value and uniqueness of who we can become when we are bound together. Humbly now we freely open ourselves to do your will, O God. In the name of Jesus we pray; Amen.*

### What are Spiritual Gifts?

“Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received” (1 Peter 4:10). Each of us has received gifts from God, and God expects us to exercise good stewardship in the use of these gifts. But what exactly are these gifts God gives? Twenty different gifts are identified in the Pauline letters to the churches in Rome (Romans 12), Corinth (1 Corinthians 12) and Ephesus (Ephesians 4). These gifts cover the broadest spectrum of outreach, witness, nurture, and service. Gifts of apostleship, evangelism, prophecy, leadership, compassion, servanthood, and the speaking and interpreting other tongues move us into the world to share God's love. Gifts of knowledge, teaching, discernment, wisdom, and helping enable us to strengthen faith and build community. Gifts such as administration, giving, healing, miracles, shepherding, exhortation, and faith ground us and empower us to serve needs within our community of faith and beyond. Paul's listing of gifts may not be exhaustive, but they illustrate the work of God's Spirit in our lives to equip and enable us to do God's work. Paul also offers some important insights into the nature of God-given gifts.

Spiritual gifts are given to each person in unique combinations. Some people live from a specific set of gifts for a lifetime, while others see new gifts emerge and other gifts recede. It is the responsibility of each person to discern and strengthen her or his gifts for ministry. The ideal place to do this is in Christian community.

Although our gifts are given to individuals, they are given for the common good, to build up the body of Christ. The gifts God gives are synergistic—combined they are greater than the sum of their parts. Individually, we can do many good things, but in combination with other gifted people, we can do great things; and by the guidance and grace of the Holy Spirit, we can even do miracles.

God gives gifts to us to bring us to unity, to knit us together in a spiritual community as the body of Christ. The human body is an amazing metaphor. Each gifted part functions best serving its unique purpose in mystical communion with every other gifted part. All are equally necessary and valuable. Another metaphor might be that of a computer. One person might be a processor, another a monitor, another an operating system, yet another a keyboard, a mouse, or a software program. Each has value in itself, but the only way any part may fulfill its potential is working together in the larger system.

### **The Fruit of the Spirit**

As we grow in our giftedness and learn together how to use our gifts more and more effectively and faithfully, an amazing thing happens: we begin to bear fruit! And not just any fruit, but the fruit of the Spirit. In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul describes the outward and visible evidence that we are living fully in God's Spirit. We will be known by the fruit we produce. All who witness our living in the world will know us because we will generate and spread love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Note that these are not *fruits* (plural), but all facets of the Holy Spirit that saturate and permeate all we say and do. Living our gifts faithfully in the world is a catalyst for radical transformation. Together, bound by God's Spirit to be the incarnate body of Christ for the world, we will produce more love AND joy AND peace AND patience AND kindness AND generosity AND faithfulness AND gentleness AND self-control. We will become who God intended us to be all along!

In John's gospel, when Jesus is preparing to leave his disciples to carry on the work he began, he reminds them, "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name" (15:16). As we grow and mature in our discipleship, we know that God's Spirit is within us, guiding us, strengthening us, and empowering us so that we might produce lasting fruit. And the things that we will ask in God's name are not selfish or personal things, but as Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, ours will be a humble prayer, "not our will be done, but yours O Lord."

### **Fruit-Producing Lessons**

Growing fruit has four very important lessons to teach us. First, if you want it to grow healthy and hearty, you must prepare the soil. Clear the rocks and roots, aerate the clay, work in nutrients and fertilizer, saturate the soil with plenty of moisture—all before planting. For us, the spiritual preparations of personal disciplines and the practice of the communal means of grace (prayer, study, reflection, worship, communion, service, and so on) are essential and valuable.

Second, sowing the seeds and planting the saplings require intentionality and design. Understanding what is being cultivated and what practices produce the greatest yield are critically important. The spiritual parallel is a process of discernment and discovery to identify our gifts and the ways we can grow in our giftedness.

Third, growing plants need cultivation, nurture, and regular attention. The practices of weeding, feeding, tying, pruning, spraying, and watering are similar, but unique for each plant and tree. We work together to develop and strengthen our gifts, which is a central function of our local congregations. Explore how gifts work together and new ways to use them—inside the congregation, as well as in the community. Opportunities to deploy gifts are important aspects of the cultivation process.

And fourth, and perhaps most important, is harvest and distribution. It isn't enough to produce the fruit. Our task is to give it away—to share it with those who need it most so that they might experience the fullness and the sweetness and the nourishment that comes from God. Love and joy, peace and kindness are more than nice descriptive nouns. They become for us verbs, action terms that we do because of who we are. We are patient in times of unrest and turmoil. We are self-controlled and faith-filled, even in the most challenging times. We are generous to all in need, gentle with those who are hurting and afraid, loving the unloved, and making peace wherever we go.

We all have been gifted. But this is only the beginning. We are gifted so that we might be joined as the body of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit to produce fruit, and sent forth to transform the world. Thanks be to God.

### **Study Questions**

1. God values all people and has given gifts to all people. Discuss what you know about spiritual gifts. If you know your spiritual gifts, name them in the group. Share how that knowledge has changed your relationship with God and others. Have you experienced a new gift emerging? Have you experienced a gift receding? Explore tools for identifying spiritual gifts and how to implement those tools in your congregation.
2. How would your congregation change if everyone actively shared their spiritual gifts? Share stories of spiritual gifts being used for the common good in the community of faith. Consider ways of identifying and nurturing gifts for leadership in your church.
3. As you review the biblical texts lifted up in the study, what are the recurring themes? Discuss how those themes relate to or produce “fruit that will last.”
4. What groups of people currently are not present, included, affirmed, or celebrated in your congregation? How might you connect with those populations? What needs to be revised in your congregation's Plan for Ministry to ensure that “all peoples, not just one race or community, are welcomed, embraced, accepted and celebrated” (see page 11)
5. Based on the known gifts within your group, plan an outreach activity to connect with people not involved in your congregation.

## Closing Prayer

*God, we acknowledge that we are your gifted people on a mission to follow Jesus and transform the world. Your unconditional love will bind us together as we seek to build up the body of Christ. We call upon you, O God, to equip us with your inspired power to always walk by faith as we explore all the many ways in which we can make a difference in the world. Prepare us through the Holy Spirit to diligently invite others into community. This community embraces, empowers, and strengthens us to live out our fruit-producing gifts of love, peace, patience, self-control, kindness, gentleness, joy, generosity, and faithfulness. Enable us, God, to always live out our fruitfulness, growing in the gifts we are in you. Help us to transform our lives through shared love and shared faith when we share our gifts with others. We thank you, God, for giving us amazing gifts that call us to live out our lives, individually and collectively, in service to you. In the name of the One who is the greatest gift of all—Jesus; Amen.*

## Conclusion

Share together the ways you been blessed by this study. What fruitful change have you experienced? What fruit will you now produce in your congregation and community?

## Suggested Resources

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