

## **Autumn Term: Overview of Optional Activities**

There are only 6 set studies for this term. Each topic touches a different aspect of our vision and our relationship with God. But in compiling the studies, and in hearing how groups sometimes like to try “new” things, it seemed appropriate to offer a series of linked, optional “activities” (actually a set of ideas, study, reflections, worship). These can potentially deepen the small group’s learning experience in a variety of ways, and are designed to support the set studies.

Not all of them may be “for you and your group”. No problem!! Feel free to pick and choose those that seem to meet your needs best.

I have enlisted help in compiling these activities, and I would like to thank in particular, Tom Darwent, Stuart Sadler, Linda Morgan, and Steve and Pippa Cramer for their contributions against an inexact brief.

There are 14 weeks between the introductory meeting on the 11<sup>th</sup> September and Christmas (including Half Term). So depending on your frequency of meeting, and interests please look through the list below and begin to plan your sessions around the topics that best serve your group.

### **More Followers of Jesus**

#### **Activity 1: Lost and Found**

Leading writer Henri Nouwen’s 1992 book, “The Return of the Prodigal Son” reflects on Rembrandt’s masterpiece and how it illustrates God “welcoming us home”. The reflective study in this section looks at the painting, and the Return from the perspective of the Younger Son and the Elder Son. In doing so, it sheds new light on what it is to be born again in his love.

A fascinating study for reflective discussion and reading together – either in a single group, or by splitting into two smaller groups.

#### **Activity 2: Open Chair**

Increasing the numbers of the HTC family attending small groups is a stated ambition of our new vision, and a key way of increasing discipleship to Jesus in our community. Has your group considered inviting new guests? Whether “inviting guests to your home group” is something you have tried many times, or not at all, this document gives thoughtful guidance on how to make the experience as successful as possible. As such, it provides an excellent discussion vehicle for a group.

### **Deeper Followers of Jesus**

#### **Activity 3: Lectio Divina**

Lectio Divina derives from a centuries-old practice of prayerful reading of Scripture. In these notes by Christian writer Joyce Huggett, the process is described in 4 steps of Read – Receive – Respond – Rest. Ideal for those seeking new light on familiar passages and to fully absorb the message. Can be done individually or in small groups, and some passages from the Old and New Testaments are suggested.

#### **Activity 4: God the Provider**

This study includes some interactive discussion of how God provides for us, then puts focus on supporting scripture, observations and prayer. An ideal session to build on Study 4 (Matthew 6:25-34).

### **Closer Followers of Jesus**

#### **Activity 5: Sharing each other's hospitality**

One of the many ways we can serve each other, and build Community for Jesus in our own small group is to share food together. Some groups have long had this as common practice, and others may not have tried this. This briefing note gives hints and suggestions on how this can be a successful and growthful experience.

#### **Activity 6: Serving Together**

## **Activity 1: Lost and Found**

**This study is natural for breaking into two sub-groups, discussing and then reconvening to reflect on the whole picture. The narrative is viewed from the perspective of the Younger and the Older son, and each begins with the story, asks some questions and then offers Henri Nouwen's own perspective on its spiritual implications for us.**

### **The Younger Son**

*There was a man who had two sons. The younger son said to his father "Father, let me have the share of the estate that will come to me." So his father divided the property between them. A few days later, the younger son got together everything he had and left for a distant country where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery.*

*When he had spent it all, that country experienced a severe famine, and now he began to feel the pinch so he hired himself out to one of the local inhabitants who put him on his farm to feed the pigs. And he would willingly have filled himself with the husks the pigs were eating but no-one would let him have them. Then he came to his senses and said, "How many of my father's hired men have all the food they want and more, and here am I dying of hunger! I will leave this place and go to my father and say "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired men." So he left the place and went back to his father.*

#### The Younger Son leaves.

Rejection of the home into which he was born and raised.

Denial of the spiritual reality that we belong to God.

- What motivated him?
- What was he searching for outside his father's house?

"Looking again at Rembrandt's portrayal of the return of the younger son, I now see how much more is taking place than a mere compassionate gesture towards a wayward child...It seems to me that these hands have always been stretched out – even when there were no shoulders upon which to rest them. God has never pulled back his arms, never withheld his blessing, never stopped considering his son the Beloved One. But the father couldn't compel his son to stay at home. He couldn't force his love on the Beloved. He had to let him go in freedom, even though he knew the pain it would cause both his son and himself.

It was love that prevented him from keeping his son home at all cost. It was love that allowed him to let his son find his own life, even with the risk of losing it."

*Nouwen: The return of the prodigal son*

*So he left the place and returned to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran towards the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him. Then his son said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son." But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the calf we have been fattening and kill it; we will celebrate by having a feast, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found." And they began to celebrate.*

#### The Younger Son returns.

In spite of everything he still remained his father's child

- What had he lost in that 'distant country'?
- Who/what did he want to come home to?
- Does repentance involve a 'long way home'?
- How does Rembrandt see the son and the father?

"One of the greatest challenges of the spiritual life is to receive God's forgiveness. There is something in us humans that keeps us clinging to our sins and prevents us from letting God erase our past and offer us a completely new beginning. Sometimes it even seems as though I want to prove to God that my darkness is too great to overcome. While God wants to restore me to the full dignity of sonship, I keep insisting that I will settle for being a hired servant....Receiving forgiveness requires a total willingness to let God be God and do all the healing, restoring, and renewing. As long as I want to do even a part of that myself, I end up with partial solutions, such as becoming a hired servant. As a hired servant, I can still keep my distance, still revolt, reject, strike, run away, or complain about my pay. As the beloved son, I have to claim my full dignity and begin preparing myself to become like the father."

*Nouwen: The return of the prodigal son*

## The Elder Son

*Now the elder son was out in the fields, and on his way back, as he drew near the house, he could hear music and dancing. Calling one of the servants, he asked what it was all about. The servant told him, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the calf we have been fattening because he has got him back safe and sound." He was angry then and refused to go in, and his father came out and began to urge him to come in; but he retorted to his father, "All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property – he and his loose women – you kill the calf we have been fattening."*

### The Elder Son leaves

The Elder Son excludes himself. Joy and resentment cannot coexist

- How does he feel towards his brother, his father?  
(‘standing with clasped hands’ in the picture)
- Is he as ‘lost’ as his younger brother?
- How do we respond to the generosity of God’s all-forgiving love towards others?

“Can the elder son in me come home? Can I be found as the younger son was found? How can I return when I am lost in resentment, when I am caught in jealousy, when I am imprisoned in obedience and duty lived out as slavery? It is clear that alone, by myself, I cannot find myself. More daunting than healing myself as the younger son is healing myself as the elder son. Confronted here with the impossibility of self-redemption, I now understand Jesus’ words to Nicodemus: “Do not be surprised when I say: ‘You must be born from above.’ Indeed, something has to happen that I myself cannot cause to happen. I cannot be reborn from below, that is, with my own strength, my own mind, with my own psychological insights.....I can only be healed from above, from where God reaches down. What is impossible for me is possible for God. “With God everything is possible.”

*Nouwen: The return of the prodigal son*

*The elder son....was angry and refused to go in, and his father came out and began to urge him to come in....*

*The father said, "My son, you are with me always, and all that I have is yours. But it is right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found."*

### The Elder Son's return

The father wants not only his younger son back, but his elder son as well. He does not compare the two sons, but loves them both with a complete love

- What does the elder son have to 'give up' in order to come home?
- The parable is open-ended.....

"Without trust I cannot let myself be found. Trust is that deep inner conviction that the Father wants me home. As long as I doubt that I am worth finding and put myself down as less loved than my younger brothers or sisters, I cannot be found. I have to keep saying to myself, "God is looking for you. He will go anywhere to find you. He loves you, he wants you home, he cannot rest unless he has you with him."

Along with trust there must be gratitude – the opposite of resentment.

Resentment and gratitude cannot coexist, since resentment blocks the perception and experience of life as a gift. My resentment tells me I don't receive what I deserve. It always manifests itself in envy. Gratitude...claims the truth that all of life is a pure gift. Gratitude as a discipline involves a conscious choice. I can choose to be grateful even when my emotions and feelings are still steeped in hurt and resentment. There is always a choice between resentment and gratitude because God has appeared in my darkness, urged me to come home and declared in a voice filled with affection: "You are with me always, and all I have is yours."

*Nouwen: The return of the prodigal son*



Rembrandt  
"Return of the Prodigal Son"

## **Activity 2: Open Chair: Inviting Guests to your Small Group**

### **Introduction**

There are many good reasons to bring guests to your small group. One obvious one is that you have a friend staying and they want to join you in your usual activities. Another is that you know of people in the church who would potentially be open to attending a group, but this seems only likely to happen in practice if someone they know invites them. Another is that you have non-Christian friends or family who are interested to know what you do at the group, and you want to make the most of this interest. For whatever reason a guest comes, however, there are many things to think about to ensure their experience is as positive and constructive as possible.

### **Why invite guests?**

In short, it is good to invite guests because it is a real opportunity. Of course in many cases 'Alpha' is the most appropriate context for an interested seeker to explore church and Christianity further. But there may be people who are not prepared to go to Alpha but would be interested in seeing what *you* do in *your* group, and to get to know *your* friends. In those circumstances it would be great to take this opportunity. And there will be many others who are already Christians and church members, who simply need a little *personal* encouragement to get involved in a small group. Given around half the church falls into this category, there is a huge potential in a major recruitment drive via personal invitation. This applies, whether invitees had simply never quite got round to joining a group (even though they had long intended to) or the idea had simply never occurred to them. And even those who had previously been hostile to the idea might reconsider if invited by someone they respect and like.

It is worth remembering too what people can gain from attending a small group. One aspect is the opportunity to experience real fellowship and friendship; another is pastoral support and prayer. And many Christians learn more from group bible studies than they do through any other means. Small groups are also far more interactive than Sunday services, presenting the opportunity for members to ask questions and have those immediately answered. There are likewise opportunities for group members to do things that are easier to do together, such as putting on evangelistic activities (e.g. a dinner party with an evangelistic speaker) or more practical projects (e.g. helping someone with decorating or moving home).

So there are many reasons to invite guests and many positive reasons why those who are asked might say yes. And it is the possibility of a positive response that makes it well worth groups being more proactive in their recruitment.

### **Words of Caution**

Yet for people who are not presently attending a group, visiting one for the first time can be a traumatic or difficult experience. So it is vital that the way a small group meeting runs has that guest firmly in mind, whilst also being true to how the group normally functions. Certainly it is good to make guests feel as comfortable as possible, by not asking them too many probing questions, explaining why you are doing particular things (so guests are not confused) and stressing that they are free to try other groups - and to visit your group several times again - before they *need* to make up their mind about whether to keep

coming. Being encouraging, affirming and yet not too pushy is the balance to aim for, with an explicit acknowledgement that different people suit different groups, and that you will not take it personally if they don't feel this is the group for them. And this sort of relaxed way of talking about it rather than the more formal language of a 'trial period' is more likely to help them feel at ease.

There are also particular things to think about if the guest has never been to a group before (at HTC or elsewhere). Never assume they know where particular books are found in the bible, understand the core principles of Christian doctrine or that they are comfortable praying out loud. And it is very important that rest of the group appears friendly and definitely not judgemental (and some groups may need tipping off about this beforehand). Equally, it is possible for groups that have been very established for a long time to unconsciously give off the message that they don't really want anything to change – or that no-one else is really welcome to join the 'inner circle'. The tone that needs to be deliberately cultivated is that the group actually *wants* new blood and fresh impetus, so that the visitor feels like they are adding something rather than taking something away.

These things are all even more important if the visitor is not yet a Christian. Everything you discuss about will require a greater degree of explanation and often a different way of talking about things that does not presume prior understanding or faith. Equally, the vibe from the group has to be that even a sceptic's perspective is welcome and valuable, whilst also flagging up the opportunity to go to Alpha (which is specifically set up for this sort of critical discussion) if there is any chance the visitor would be prepared to go.

What can also be tricky is if you as a group leader are not sure whether the visitor is right for the group and there is a genuine possibility that it is you who will be pulling out of the arrangement rather than them. Obviously it is much better to be able to form a view on this before they come along, and if that's not possible, use the utmost sensitivity and perhaps suggest another group for them to join instead.

## **What to do**

It is also worth planning carefully what you are going to do on a night when guests are present. Obviously there is a value in them seeing home group in its normal form, but for an explicitly evangelistic context or where a visitor has not been to a group before, something that has more of a social/getting to know each other focus may be more appropriate. If you are still doing a bible study, choose one that is accessible to non-Christians (e.g a passage from the gospels rather than a particularly complex extract from the Pauline epistles). Intercessory prayer can work well with non-Christians as long as they don't feel *obliged* - though *do feel free* - to pray themselves. Short and simple prayers, in this context, are more appropriate.

It is also worth thinking about inviting more than one guest at the same time. It can be better for the group and certainly more comfortable for the guests to have several spaces in the group opened up at once. One of my groups, which had been shredding water a little, decided to bring in 5 new graduates from the church's Alpha course, and this worked incredibly well. It changed the atmosphere of the group overnight, but the stability of the original group and their love of each other was the foundation that allows the transition to be almost seamless. A compromise is to invite two new guests – they will feel more

comfortable not being the only new face, but the additional effect on the rest of the group will be minimal.

### **Follow up**

The last stage in the process is follow up. I would advise not grilling guests on what they thought of the home group as they are leaving through the door. Better just to affirm that you were all delighted they could join you and that they are very welcome to come again. Then perhaps after a day or two call them to ask more directly their feelings – they will appreciate having had time to think (and pray) about it and not having felt pressured. And do let them know what you are doing the following week, especially if there are special arrangements, whether or not they have yet made up their mind.

### **A final word**

And the most important thing: pray. Pray for your guests before and after the meeting and keep them on the group's radar for weeks or months afterwards, even if they are not immediately keen to return. I have known people start off as sort of 'affiliated members' – who initially are very uncommitted – but who over time, having realised that they were still valued and cared about, even in their absence, became much more committed. A 'take-it-or-leave-it' attitude by contrast can be very counter-productive.

### **Activity 3: Lectio Divina (Meditation on the Bible)**

One method of dropping into God's stillness was handed down to us from the fifth century or even earlier. It is commonly known as *Lectio Divina*, a term which signifies a prayerful reading and pondering of the Scriptures which 'has contemplation as its assumed culmination'. Since Latin is no longer a familiar language for most of us, 'the practice of the four R's' might be a better way of describing this powerful method of prayer .

#### **Read**

The first R stands for Read because this praying of the Scriptures begins with a meditative reading of a passage from the Bible. In the earliest days of Christianity, Jesus' disciples were not fortunate enough to own a bible for themselves. They therefore listened to the Scriptures being read to them. As they did so, they waited until a phrase or word or sentence attracted them. Our aim as we read slowly and deliberately and meditatively is similar -to listen to the words and to wait until a short phrase or sentence or a single word draws us to itself or appeals to us in some mysterious way. If this is to happen, instead of reading a passage just once or skim reading, it is usually necessary to read the passage several times giving it our full attention until we are truly attuned to it; to move from the first R to the second.

#### **Receive**

Our goal is to personalise the words; to receive them as though God had written them for us at this precise moment in time. Indeed, the aim of this attentive reading is to spend time alone with God, to discover more about him and to hear what he wants to say to us. I sometimes liken this reading to finding a fallen leaf in autumn or catching a snow flake in winter. Just as children and some adults take delight in turning over and over in their hands such pieces of God 's creation, contemplating them, so the person of prayer can hold a piece of Scripture in their mind and heart, focus, dwell, stand guard over, ponder and brood on it and prepare themselves to penetrate it with the intention of receiving and savouring it so that through it they encounter God personally.

#### **Recite**

Or again, I sometimes liken it to reading a letter from someone we love. It frequently happens that, as we read, a small phrase will trigger an unexpected reaction or awaken our curiosity. Even when we have put the letter away, we discover that those few words have lodged in our minds and captured our imagination. They tumble round our brain exciting us or troubling us. We find ourselves repeating them over and over .

And that is precisely what these early Christians did with 'their' phrase. They would recite it and commit to memory the words which had attracted them. As we recite, memorise and welcome the Word which has awakened in us a response and as we ponder it, we are receiving it in such a way that, eventually, we may hear far more from God than these few words seem at first to convey.

#### *Regurgitate*

And we find that, slowly and gradually, as we give our assent to God's Word, we are being changed by it -mysteriously and imperceptibly. A picture which helps me to understand what is happening through this process comes from the pen of Gerard Hughes in his outstanding book, *God of Surprises*:

The process is analogous to sucking a boiled sweet. Do not try to analyse the phrase just as you would not normally break up a boiled sweet and subject it to chemical analysis before tasting. Often a phrase will catch the attention of our

subconscious mind's needs long before our conscious mind is aware of the reason for the attraction.

I like that. But because boiled sweets spoil our teeth, I prefer to liken the process to the slow sucking of a strong throat lozenge. We select our Bible lozenge, suck it as slowly as possible, savour it, and feel its healing properties oozing into the innermost recesses of our being trusting that the Holy Spirit knows precisely those parts of us which need to be soothed or touched; challenged or changed.

### **Respond**

When the Word of God does its healing, transforming work in us in this way, it calls from us a response which becomes the springboard for our prayer. This response is the third R. It might be a prayer which bursts out as we say our 'yes' to God or as we recognise more fully his love or his greatness or his holiness. It might express the opening up of our heart to God. Or it might result in an outpouring of the love we feel for him, the resolves we want to make or the heart-hunger for him which his Word has exposed. In time, our response grows. The flow of words ceases. We pass beyond speaking and thinking to 'simple presence'. 'Just being'. We become present to the truth or the reality which God has given us.

### **Rest**

*While we are being drawn towards God in this way, we may find ourselves longing simply to be still: to 'be present' to the wonder of God and his creation, resting, relaxing and delighting in his lavish love.*

#### *Realign*

It is while we are gazing on God in this way that the desire to change is re-kindled. We read, not primarily to relish the riches of contemplation, but that we may be continuously converted. Changed. From birth, we live for 'number one'. Self. But God is concerned to turn us around- to turn us away from narcissistic self-love and self-serving to the self-giving love and service of God and others which Jesus modelled to us. One of the tools he uses to effect these changes is his Word. So when God's Word shows us that we must change in any way, then change we must. Sometimes he shows us that our mind needs to be renewed so that our thoughts are brought into line with his. At other times it is our perception which is challenged and changed until it is brought into alignment with the God of the Bible. And frequently our feelings, desires, life-style and attitudes will need to be converted, turned round, so that they become one with his. All he needs is our consent and co-operation. When he has that he, the heavenly potter, will take the raw material of our lives and re-fashion it into a vessel which is more beautiful and more useful than anything we have known previously. This is his ministry.

*From 'Open to God' by Joyce Huggett*

### **Some suggestions for reading:**

Isaiah 43: 1-13 (*you could substitute your own name into the text as seems appropriate*)

Ephesians 1: 15-23, or 2: 11-22

John 15: 1-17

One of the Psalms

## **Activity 4: God the Provider**

### **Introduction**

**We tend to take it for granted, but God is the great Provider in all things.**

**Not only did he design everything in creation for our needs and pleasure, but he is constantly renewing it by his power. Neither we nor anything else in creation could exist without his constant, generous provision. Let us praise the One from whom all things come.**

### **EITHER**

You will need a piece of paper and a pen for each member of the group.

Ask everyone to make a written list of everything they have bought or been given in the last 24 hours (not necessarily the whole contents of a supermarket trolley). Then ask each person to read all or some of their list. Thank God for his provision of your physical needs. Perhaps use Matthew 6:26-34 to help you focus on his promises and priorities.

### **OR**

Ask people to suggest things God supplies that are essential to our lives (drink, food, clothes, oxygen, family, friendships, love).

Then ask people to suggest things that are not essential, but are there just as a sign of God's extravagant giving (colours, the seasons, snowflakes, new dawn).

Encourage people to thank God for his overwhelming, extravagant provision.

### **THANKSGIVING**

- You know every need we have
- You supply all things with abundance and extravagance
- You care for our emotional, physical and spiritual needs
- You didn't just set the world in motion; you are constantly sustaining and providing for what you have made.

### **SCRIPTURE**

Remind yourselves of Matthew 6:26

Read Colossians 1:15-17

*15He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. 17He is before all things, and in him all things hold together*

He knows what we need because he made us, and he has complete power and control over every aspect of creation. How can we doubt his ability to provide for us?

## **God's special provision for his people**

### **2 Peter 1:3**

*3His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness*

We're called to a life of godliness. However, we achieve it not by our own strength, but by drawing on God's provision of power within us. We all have a need, not just to survive, but to live victoriously.

### **Matthew 6:8**

*8Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him*

Lord, you understand our needs better than we do. We can rely on your judgement and goodness to give us what is best.

### **PRAYER**

Thank you for your daily provision, both for our needs and for our delights – you truly are an extravagant Father who gives his children the best. We are sorry that we take this for granted. Please help us to be continually thankful for all you give to us. Amen.

### **APPLICATION**

Sometimes we miss out on the wonder of his provision because we are too preoccupied with looking inward at our own problems. Sometimes, we fail to receive his best, because we strive to provide for ourselves without looking to him.

Ask God to show you areas where you fail to look to him in areas of important provision (be it material, relationship or spiritual), then pray them together as a group or in twos, asking God to help you rely on his goodness.

## **Activity 5: Sharing Each Others' Hospitality (Food and Homegroups)**

Having a meal together can be a very valuable way of building friendship and therefore trust and openness in a homegroup setting.

Throughout the gospels we see Jesus eating with people time after time. Food was a central part of his fellowship with his disciples. The last supper is just one example of Jesus using a food/feasting occasion to bring his disciples together and to share his deepest thoughts.

Today eating together remains a vital way for people to feel relaxed and open. From business lunches, to friends meeting for coffee, to dinner parties, eating and drinking together is an essential part of building relationships.

Sitting round a table together, rather than being spread out across a sitting room also brings a closeness and openness. Often the best conversations can happen around a dinner table.

Offering food at homegroup is also a valuable way of displaying hospitality and generosity. Whilst it need never be the most complex meal it should at least be as good as or better than you would serve yourself. Offering the cheapest least appetising food will simply display the opposite of what eating together should do.

If you are going to have a full meal together you should consider the following: -

1. Is your goal to just have a social or are there some important issues you would like to discuss.
2. If there are some issues, the best time to raise these are at the end of the main course before pudding (or if no pudding, before coffee & biscuits). This is when people are most relaxed and will be most willing to talk.
3. Think about whether you want to have wine with meal
4. What involvement would you like the group to have, you could either get everyone to bring a dish, or provide the food yourself this time and get others to volunteer for future meals
5. Don't try to be too elaborate with the food... the following often work well: -
  - Spaghetti Bolognese, garlic bread & salad
  - Pasta with a (good) ready made tomato sauce , Salad
  - Chilli con carne (not too hot!) & rice
6. Either serve a couple of simple puddings (eg. cake, banoffie pie, something chocolatey!) or just offer some good coffee and chocolates
7. Don't forget to check whether anyone is a vegetarian or has any food intolerances

Most of all have fun... if you are happy and relaxed, this will pass on to the rest of the group, so do enjoy your evening!