

FRUITFUL LIVING

SPRING 2021

Twelve Devotions for
Ministry Teams &
Committees



By Diane Shallue

Part of the Christian Education Network of the ELCA
Presents
"Learning Strategies
for the Life of Faith Initiative."

Goal of the series: To equip congregational leaders to find ways to love and serve the world in all that they do.

NOTES:

About the writer: Dr. Diane Shallue is a teacher, wife, mother of three and grandmother to six. She is a retired deacon in the ELCA, serving for 25 years in four congregations in the Minneapolis Area Synod. She is passionate about intergenerational faith formation. For more information about Diane, see the Appendix.

Introduction: This series of twelve devotions, consisting of a Biblical reading, a short meditation and a prayer, is intended for church councils and committees. There are reflection questions and optional activities to engage participants at a deeper level, depending on the time.

I would urge taking more time for devotions during meetings and using the optional materials. Leaders of church committees often shorten or skip devotional time because of concern about a full agenda, but this move does not give an opportunity for spiritual growth or team building. Connection to God is what fuels energy and commitment to living as a Christian. It must not be neglected. The purpose of these devotions is to build a stronger relationship to God and to build deeper connections among team members to create energy for loving and serving the world.

Here is a personal story. I am a person who likes to get things done and always have a long to-do list. During the last ten years of my 25 years of serving as congregational staff, I realized that spending all our committee time planning programs was not helping people grow in faith. I began to allocate 30 - 40 minutes of each 90 minute committee meeting to check-in time and Bible talk. I made this decision with trepidation as we always had a full agenda. But . . . to my surprise, we got all the work done in the remaining time. So be brave and commit to spiritual growth for your team.

At the end in an appendix is an outline of the format that I used for discussion. In the appendix, you will also find more information about me and a bibliography.

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Session one:

Focus: God loves us

Biblical reference: I John 4: 7-12, 16

In the creation story in Genesis, God created the whole world including humans and declared it good. God's love called the world into being. In the gospel of John, we are shown how much God loves us. Many people have memorized John 3:16. I like the wording of 1 John 4:9 better. God's love was revealed so that we might live through God's son, Jesus the Christ. Verse 16 says that we have known and believe the love God has for us. When I read these words, I think of God's love for us and how all of us need that love. That brings to mind a song written by Burt Bacharach and Hal David in 1965, "What the World Needs Now."

What the world needs now is love, sweet love
It's the only thing that there's just too little of
What the world needs now is love, sweet love
No not just for some but for everyone

We all need love. It is love that creates and sustains the world. God shows us love when we look and listen for it. God speaks through the Bible, through sermons, through conversation with others, through a song you hear on the radio, through a billboard along the highway, through the hug of a child, through the laughter of a friend, through the sympathetic listening ear of a friend. Then we can respond with joy to this wondrous love. (See ELW 666 – What Wondrous Love Is This)

Prayer: Dear God, you love us so much. You have created a world of beauty for us to live in. You have given us families and put us into communities. You provide everything that we need. In response, we rejoice. Amen.

Reflection questions:

1. What tells you that God loves you?
2. In what ways does God show love for you?

Optional Activities:

1. Watch the YouTube video of Diane Warwick singing the song with pictures of people from around the world. (about 3 minutes) As you watch this video, look for an image that seems to capture best God's love for the world. Share this with the group later. ["What the World Needs Now is Love" Dionne Warwick HD - with Lyrics - YouTube](#)
1. Make a list of all the ways that God shows love to you. Make another list of how God shows love to your congregation. Make a third list of how God shows love to your community.

Session 2:

Focus: Loving God

Biblical passage to read: Luke 10:27

Loving God with ALL our heart, soul, strength and mind encompasses a lot. We move from being loved by God, to loving God in return. We love because God first loved us. (1 John 4:19) Our love is miniscule compared to God's love.

People are often worried. They are told they ought to love God. They cannot find any such feeling in themselves. What are they to do? The answer is the same as before. Act as if you did. Do not sit trying to manufacture feelings. Ask yourself, 'If I were sure that I loved God, what would I do?' When you have found the answer, go and do it. — C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

We might not have a lot of strength or heart but we can love God with all that we have – all that we can manage and it is enough. In what ways do we show love to God? We can worship, pray, read the Bible, and/or volunteer in church activities. These activities are what Dwight Dubois in his book, *The Scattering*, called the gathered church. As we strengthen our connection to God, we bolster our ability to love. What builds your connection to God? Dubois states, "Living in God's love pulls us, propels us out into the world, to love and serve our neighbor." He also says, "Faith is directed toward heaven and love is directed towards one's neighbor. Both faith in God and the call to love one's neighbor constitute an organic unity." (p. 14) He imagines Christians as being bungee jumpers, moving in between faith and love; moving in and out. We gather in community but then move out in love doing God's will in the world – just as we pray in the Lord's Prayer. So loving God comes first, and then loving our neighbor.

Prayer: Dear God, We are so thankful for all the love you give us. Open our eyes to see you everywhere. Open our hearts to reach out to you with love. Open our ears to hear you speak to us. Open our hands so that we can reach out in love to others. Amen.

Reflection question/ optional activity:

1. How do you show your love to God?
2. Make a chart and how you show love to God in various areas of your life.

While at church	
While at home	
While at work	
While at school	

Bible Talk:

The leader invites a member of the group to read the biblical text slowly.

Identify which translation of the Bible is being read.

Leader says: "As _____ reads this the passage, I invite you to listen for a word, a phrase or image that speaks to you."

After reading say, "Using Mutual Invitation, I now invite you to share a word, phrase, or image in this passage that stands out to you."

(Remind people that it is ok to say, "Pass.")

I find it helpful to allow people to use whatever translation of the Bible they prefer. We do not all have to use the same translation.



Mutual Invitation Method and Bible Talk Time

- A. Let participants know how much time is set aside for this process.
- B. Introduce the process by reading the following:
In order to ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to speak, we will proceed in the following way:
 - *The leader or a designated person will share first. After that person has spoken, he or she then invites another to share. Whom you invite does not need to be the person next to you. After the next person has spoken, that person is given the privilege to invite another to share. If you don't want to say anything, simply say "pass" or "pass for now" and proceed to invite another to share. We will do this until everyone has been invited. If anyone said "pass for now," invite them again to share.*
 - *After everyone has had an opportunity to share, then you may ask questions or ask for clarification.*
- C. The first time you use this with the group, it will feel very awkward. The tendency is to give up on the process and go back to the "whoever-wants-to-talk-can-talk" way. If you are persistent in using this process every time you facilitate the gathering, the group will eventually get used to it and monitor the process themselves.
- D. Problems to anticipate: This process addresses differences in the perception of personal power among the participants. Some people will be eager for their turn, while others will be reluctant to speak when they are invited. If a person speaks very briefly and then does not remember to invite the next person, do not invite for him or her. Simply point out that this person has the privilege to invite the next person to speak. This is especially important if a person "passes." By ensuring that this person still has the privilege to invite, you affirm and value that person independent of that person's verbal ability.

From *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community*. Mutual Invitation method was created by Eric H.F. Law. See web site for the Kaleidoscope Institute at [Free Resources — Kaleidoscope Institute \(kscopeinstitute.org\)](http://www.kscopeinstitute.org)

Session 3:

Focus: Loving Neighbor

Biblical passage to read: John 13:34

We all have various roles that we play in our daily lives. I am wife, mom, grandmother, teacher and friend. These roles give me a sense of meaning and purpose in my life. I get a lot of love back from others through the daily activities related to these roles. I think many people are looking for meaning and purpose and love, some times in unhealthy ways. The country western song, "Looking for Love in All The Wrong Places," comes to mind. Many people are looking for love in all the wrong places and in all the wrong faces. Can we be the face of love to them?

This might mean being a skilled accountant, a caring nurse, a diligent teacher, a careful bus driver, or a smiling checkout clerk at the grocery store. We have the call from Jesus to love our neighbors which is expressed in all different ways depending on our skills and opportunities. They do not have to be big efforts or significant undertakings. Mother Teresa says, "If you can't feed a hundred people, then feed just one." And "Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love." So move out on the bungee band into the world and look for ways to show the love of God.

Prayer: Dear God, You loved us so much. Help us to love you with our heart and mind and strength. Help us to love others in whatever way we can. We need your help. Strengthen us. We pray in your name, Amen.

Reflection questions/ optional activities:

1. How do you show love for others?
2. Using magazines, pair up with another person, cut out pictures and create a collage poster showing ways to love others.
3. Read the lyrics to the country western song: "Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places." Or find a good video of this song.

I was lookin' for love in all the wrong places. Lookin' for love in too many faces. Searchin' their eyes, lookin' for traces. Of what I'm dreamin' of. Hoping to find a friend and a lover. I'll bless the day I discover, Another heart- lookin' for love. And I was alone then, no love in sight.

Lee, Johnny. "Looking for Love." *Metrolyrics*, 2021. www.metrolyrics.com/looking-for-love-lyrics-johnny-lee.html

- What are some of the wrong places where people look for love?
- What some of the wrong faces where people are looking for love?
- How can you be the face of love to another person?

Session 4:

Focus: Being fruitful in the spirit

Biblical passage to read: Galatians 5:22-23

In John chapter 15:5, Jesus says that he is the vine and we are the branches. Those who abide in Jesus will bear much fruit. This fruit is not some abstract philosophical concept. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control involve concrete actions towards our neighbors. How do we demonstrate joy? Or patience? It is lived out in the small decisions we make every day on how to respond to others. We cannot control our feelings but we can control our actions and our responses.

While caring for a six-year-old granddaughter, we watched “My Pretty Pony: The Magic of Friendship.” Twilight Sparkle became friends with five other ponies. They were looking for the Elements of Harmony to defeat the evil Nightmare Moon who wanted it to be night continuously. The Elements of Harmony were honesty, kindness, laughter, generosity, and loyalty. Friendship is the necessary sixth element which unleashes the magic to make the other five elements work. It made me think of the Fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5. The title, “Elements of Harmony,” describes how the fruits of the spirit work – creating harmony in the world. The magic spark is the power of the Holy Spirit which enriches our relationship with God and with others. My granddaughter and I read the passage in Galatians and then watched the show again. Helping children learn the elements of harmony is a way to live out faith. How can we work with schools to emphasize those values at home and in the community?

Prayer: Dear God, Help us to be fruitful branches of your vine. Give us strength to show love towards you and other people, give us patience and self-control, help us to be gentle in our speech and actions towards all, to be generous to those in need, to express joy that bubbles up inside without reservation, to work for peace among peoples and countries, and to be faithful in our commitments. Come Holy Spirit – give us strength and power to be fruitful disciples. We pray in the name of our Lord, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Reflection questions/ optional activity:

1. Of the Fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23, which ones are the easiest for you to show in your daily life? Which are the most difficult?
2. What are some obstacles which hinder you from having the elements of harmony?
3. Give each person three red paper apple shapes and three paper brown rock shapes. Write on each apple a gift of the spirit that you will work to produce in your life. Write on each rock an obstacle that might prevent you from being fruit in this way. Put up branches of a tree on a wall. Put the fruits on the tree and the rocks under the tree.

Appendixes:

Lyrics to “They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Love”

Vs. 1: We are one in the Spirit, We are one in the Lord
We are one in the Spirit, We are one in the Lord
And we pray that all unity. May one day be restored

Refrain: And they'll know we are Christians By our love, By our love
Yes, they'll know we are Christians By our love

Vs. 2: We will walk with each other, We will walk hand in hand
We will walk with each other, We will walk hand in hand
And together we'll spread the news, That God is in our land.

Refrain

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More about Diane Shallue

Diane has degrees in elementary education and pastoral theology as well as a doctorate in educational leadership. She is a retired deacon in the ELCA having served in four Minneapolis, Minnesota area congregations in children’s ministry, youth ministry, small group ministry, adult faith formation and intergenerational faith formation. She has been an adjunct faculty member at Luther Seminary in St. Paul and at United Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Diane has been a member of the Christian Education Network of the ELCA (formerly the Lutheran Association of Christian Educators) since 2004 and served as national president. She enjoys gardening, walking, and reading. She and her husband, Bob, enjoy traveling and hanging out with their children and grandchildren.

Find free resources related to faith formation on her web site: <http://dianeshallue.weebly.com>.

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Session twelve:

Focus: Being Living Water to the World

Biblical passage to read: Revelation 22:1-2

We are the church. We are God's hands and feet and voice in the world. We are like an irrigation canal providing living water to a thirsty world around us. Along this canal are trees that bear fruit. Individually, we are each a tree growing by that irrigation canal. The living water provides nourishment for us – the trees – so that we can bear fruit for the world. We, the church, gather in worship and scatter our fruit into the world. We go back and forth from being the gathered community to the scattered community. We are people on the move – moving out into the world, moving back into Christian community for support, encouragement and sustenance, then moving back out again.

God does not want perfection from us. God is looking for trusting, loving, picking-up-the-pieces, hanging-in-there kind of people using their whole heart, mind, soul, body, emotions, skills and abilities. Each small act of kindness has an impact. Jesus says in Matthew 10:42 that even just giving a cup of water to a little one is a worthy task. Never underestimate how God works through each of us wherever we find ourselves.

Prayer: Dear God, Thanks for the water of life that you give to us through your church. Support us with the power of the Holy Spirit as we use that water to bear fruit for the sake of the world. Give us energy to love you and serve others. Amen.

Reflection questions/ optional activity:

1. What energizes you to be of service to others?
2. How are we God's agents in our daily lives?
3. What keeps you from serving others? How might you overcome those obstacles?
4. Who can you ask to partner with you in serving?
5. Watch the video: [Starfish story - www.starfishsolutions.ca](http://www.starfishsolutions.ca) - YouTube (about 90 seconds) What encouragement do you feel from this story? What obstacles are revealed?

Session five:

Focus: Gifts for Ministry

Biblical passage to read: Romans 12:6-13

We are all given different interests, talents, skills, and abilities. Yet all are given to us for the common good. I recently read a book, *Britt-Marie Was Here*, which helped me realize the importance of even small tasks to make a difference in the lives of people in a community.

Britt-Marie is 63 years old and has left her husband because he was unfaithful. She gets a job caring for a recreation center in a small dying town named Borg. She has not held a job outside her home for over 40 years and is only good at cleaning. In the process of cleaning the recreation center, she becomes a soccer coach for the local children although she does not understand the game. She comes to care for the children and they care about her. Britt-Marie brings hope to the village and the children bring hope of a new life for her. Although she is a simple awkward quiet woman, she brings transformation through doing what she does best – cleaning.

The author writes several times in the book, "At a certain age almost all the questions a person asks him or herself are really just about one thing: how should you live your life?" (Chapter 31) As Christians, what we do every day is tied to our relationship to God. Martin Luther says:

Christ teaches us that it is not enough to praise faith and Christ, but we also need to produce Christian fruit....But some may object, 'Doesn't faith justify and save us without works?' Yes, that's true. But where's your faith? How does it show itself? Faith must never be useless, deaf, dead or in a state of decay. But it must be a living tree that bursts forth with fruit..." (*Faith Alone—Luther's Works* 24: 264.)

Like in Britt-Marie's case, even the small things we do, show the love of God to our family, our friends, our colleagues, our neighbors, and to the community.

Prayer: Dear God, Help us to discover what we do best and then do it to help our neighbor and to serve God. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

Reflection questions/ optional activity:

1. How is God working through your everyday roles and relationships to provide the necessities of life for your neighbor?
2. List three skills or activities that you do well. Thank God for these skills and talents.
3. Create a chart with the skills and activities in the first column. A second column for how they serve the neighbor.

Your skills, talents, interests	How to use them to serve others

Session six:

Focus: Practicing how to love our neighbor

Biblical passage to read: 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

This passage about love is often read at weddings. It details how the fruits of the spirit are demonstrated in our daily lives. It is not easy to be patient when you are trying to get three small children out the door. It is hard not to insist on your own way when you **know** the best way to do something. Hoping, enduring, and loving are attitudes that are lived out in our daily interactions with others. They are important but they are not easy to do!

We need to practice acting in loving ways, just as we practice to get better at other skills. We also need practice in living as a Christian. Dorothy Bass says:

When we see some of our ordinary activities as Christian practices, we come to perceive how our daily lives are all tangled up with the things God is doing in the world. Now we want to figure out how to pattern our practices after God's, and it becomes our deepest hope to become partners in God's reconciling love for the world. We are never able to do this perfectly, at least not for any length of time. Even so, when we set ordinary daily activities in this context. They are transformed, and so are we. A meal becomes a time of forgiveness. A day of leisure becomes a day of contemplation. (*Practicing Our Faith*, p. 8)

Where to begin? Practices fall into two categories for Christians: love of God (devotional practices) or love of neighbor (ethical practices). Some devotional practices as outlined by Bass (*Christianity After Religion*, p. 148) are prayer, reading holy texts, Bible study, worship, memorizing scripture, fasting, meditation and silence, and attending worship. Some ethical practices she lists are derived from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 such as caring for the sick and oppressed, serving the poor and hungry, peacemaking, forgiveness and reconciliation. She says, "Practices weave together a way of life, they shape character, create connections between people, order our choices, and deepen our wisdom about living in the world." (*Christianity*, 146). We can choose to be more intentional in our actions and how we relate to God and to others. We can begin to practice acting as a Christian.

Prayer: Dear God, We tend to want to go along, get along, go with the flow. Then we lose sight of how you want us to live. Help us to practice living in love. Give us friends on this journey of intentionality. We ask for help. Amen.

Reflection questions/ optional activity:

1. Which of the words that describe love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-5 seem easiest for you? Which are the most difficult to live out?
2. Challenge each person in the group to pick one practice that seems to tug on their heart. Ask them to practice it regularly the next month and see what happens. Ask them to write that practice/attitude/ action it on a slip of paper and seal it in an envelope with their name on it. Give it back to them the next month, and ask them to report on how it went.

Session eleven:

Focus: Being sent

Biblical passage to read: 1 Peter 2:9-10

This biblical passage says that we have been chosen by God to tell others of God's mighty acts. I do not go knocking on doors in my neighborhood telling people about Jesus. I prefer to show God's mighty acts through my small acts of love. Getting to know the names of my neighbors. Taking some food to those who move into the neighborhood. Taking over small gifts for those who had babies. Asking how they are doing. As my husband and I are retired, we offered to be on the list to pick up the neighbor kids when they are ill. Bob and I try to be a loving presence in our neighborhood. Sometimes we talk about our faith but not very often. Yet people know we are Christians by our love. (At least I hope so!)

Each of us might go in different directions to show God's love. My way is not your way. My call is not your call. We may share a vision of working for peace or justice or showing love in the world but see different causes for suffering and different ways to encourage others.

Walk around your neighborhood where you live or the neighborhood where your church building is located. Take a look as if you were seeing the neighborhood for the first time. What did you see? Who was there? Who does not live there? Do people seem to know each other? Is there a place to gather as community in this neighborhood? What thoughts and feelings run through your mind? What is God doing here? When you walk around your church building think about the same questions. Do people in this neighborhood know your church exists? How is the congregation connected to the community? We are sent to show God's love in our neighborhoods.

Prayer: Dear God, Help us to notice the people in our neighborhoods. Open our eyes to see who they are and how they are connected. Help us to find ways to support and encouragement them. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Reflection questions/ optional activity:

1. How do you demonstrate God's love in your neighborhood where you live?
2. How does your congregation demonstrate God's love in the community where the church building is located?
3. Walk around the area where you live thinking of the questions above.
4. Have your committee or team or church council walk around your church building and think about the questions above.
5. Sing the song, "They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Love." Or watch a YouTube video of the song or read the lyrics together. (See Appendix)

Session ten:

Focus: God gives us a task

Biblical passage to read: Esther 4:13-17

In this session, I want to reflect on leadership in a time like this. We are called to make a difference in our homes and in our communities, but we cannot make a difference alone. Mordecai told Esther that maybe she came to be a queen for such a time as this when she could work to save the Jews from being killed. Esther asked her community to fast and pray for her as she approached the king. She was called to a position of leadership, but she needed the support and encouragement of her community. You are in a leadership position in your community – at home or in the congregation or at work. It may be a position with a large amount of responsibility or a small amount of responsibility, but all are important. Even being in charge of cleaning the kitchen is a leadership task. Doing all tasks intentionally in God's name makes a difference in the world.

Leadership also involves making a commitment to a group of people. Esther made a commitment to speak to the king about the decree to kill her people. She asked for a commitment from them to fast on her behalf to support her commitment. Leadership always involves community and needs the support of others.

Prayer: Dear God, You have called us into the role of leadership in many different tasks. Give us the power of your Holy Spirit to help us as leaders. Help us find others to support and encourage us as we serve in your name. Amen.

Reflection questions/ optional activities:

1. In what areas are you a leader?
2. What are the commitments you have made?
3. Do you feel supported or abandoned in these commitments? Challenged or underestimated?
4. What happens when we are unable to keep all of our commitments?
5. Who among your family or friends give you support in your role as a leader?
6. Tell a story of someone who made a difference in your community at work, at school, or in your church. What did they do? What was the motivation? Where did this person find their strength? What lasting difference did it make? What effect did it have on you?
7. Create a list or a series of circles show the various levels/ types of commitments in your life.

Session seven:

Focus: Living a Life worthy of Christ

Biblical passage to read: Colossians 1:9-14

Living a life worthy of God has two parts in this biblical passage: bearing fruit through good works and growing in knowledge of God. The prayer of the author is that we will be made strong with strength from the power of the Holy Spirit, be prepared to endure everything with patience and give thanks to God. Living a worthy life is not going to be easy. We will need knowledge, strength, and endurance. For all that we need support – friends.

In a discussion with some friends from my church about keeping the Ten Commandments, we shared that being grateful helps when we are envious and jealous of others. I am reading a devotional book titled *One Thousand Gifts* by Ann Voskamp. Because of a challenge from a friend to name 1000 gifts, Voskamp began to carry around a notebook in which to list things for which she was thankful. It opened her eyes to see all the many and various gifts that God was giving to her from simple things like snow on trees to the smile of a child and transformed her life into one lived with joy. Keeping this list became a practice of thanksgiving.

Dorothy Bass explains, "Practices are not merely spiritual activities we do to entertain ourselves. Practices enliven and awaken us to the work of God in the world. Practices are the connective tissue between what is, what can be, and what will be." (*Christianity*, p. 160)

I think the key word in this biblical passage is "joyfully giving thanks." So maybe thanksgiving or thanks-living is the first practice to work on. Washing dishes, feeding cattle, cutting the grass, taking out the garbage, playing with children can all become a blessing if done as a gift to God. We can take simple tasks and make them joyful by giving thanks.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to be worthy of your love. Help us to be thankful for what you, O Lord, have given us and then reach out in joy and love to others. Help us to be patient, slow to speak and quick to listen, asking for help when we need it, and giving help when others need us. Help us to know more about you. Give us strength to practice loving in many different ways. Joyfully we lift our praise to you. Amen.

Reflection questions/ optional activity:

1. How do you know what it means to live a worthy life?
2. Who helps you to live a worthy life?
3. How do you work to grow in knowledge of God?
4. Make list of ten things for which you are thankful.

Session eight:

Focus: Turning to God for strength

Biblical passage: Isaiah 30:15-18

I found this biblical passage when my to-do list kept getting longer and I was overwhelmed with things to do. I found that I wasted energy by rushing around, trying to do everything at once. I want to flee on a swift horse but am pursued by many more tasks until I am left all alone, a solitary exhausted pole on the top of a mountain. Then through the words of Isaiah I hear God say, “Stop. Wait a minute. Rest a while in me and you will be saved or healed. You will find your strength in being quiet and in trusting in me.” Then I take a deep breath. Look at that list of items to do. What can I delete? What can I defer? What can I delegate? What is most important?

I think of Psalm 46:10 “Be still and know that I am God.” I am reminded that I am not in charge of the world. All my rushing around will not save anyone. The list of things to do is put into its proper perspective and my relationship to God and to other people shifts into clearer focus. I remember to love God with my whole heart, mind and strength and love my neighbor as I do myself. Some of us try too hard to control all the details in the master plan, when the only thing that is expected, required or desired of us is to do our individual jobs and do them with love.

Prayer: Dear God, Slow us down when we tend to get uptight and overworked. Help us to remember that we can return to you for strength. You wait for us to open our eyes and see you there patiently inviting us to rest in you. We pray in your holy name. Amen.

Reflection question/ optional activity:

1. Tell about a time when you felt overwhelmed.
2. What helps you relax when feeling overwhelmed?
3. Find a Bible passage to memorize and recite to yourself when feeling too busy. Some suggestions: Isaiah 30:15, Psalm 46:10, Psalm 4:8, Philippians 4:6-7.

Session nine:

Focus: Encourage and build up one another.

Biblical passage: I Thessalonians 5:11-18

During isolation in this time of Covid-19 pandemic during 2020 and now into 2021, I find that I miss the encouragement of other people. I miss smiles and hugs and kind words of concern. I have an affirmation jar that is filled with slips of paper with comments of thanks and appreciation from other people. When I am feeling discouraged, I pull out some of the comments and read them.

I agreed to be on a telephone calling team that my congregation organized in 2020. We attempted to call each member three times over the course of the year. We left lots of messages but those to whom we actually talked were so appreciative of a caring voice. It is not as good as a hug but smiles and caring can come through a phone line.

Martin Luther mentions that the gospel or good news comes to us in five ways. One of them is the “mutual conversation and consolations of brethren.” (Smalcald Articles IV) This tells me that connecting with fellow Christians is one of the ways we hear about the love of God – the good news for our lives. Jesus in Matthew 18:20 says that he is among us whenever we gather with another Christian person. The challenge is finding ways to encourage one another when distanced from one another for health reasons. Another challenge is speaking words that build up others, not giving criticism, not using derogatory language, but finding ways to speak in positive tones and words. Positive speech not only builds up individuals but builds up the whole community.

Prayer: Dear God, Help me to speak in ways that encourage others. Help me to find ways to patiently encourage the faint-hearted and help the weak. Amen.

Reflection question/ optional activity:

1. In what ways do other people encourage and build you up?
2. List three people you could encourage through a phone call, a letter, or some other way. Now follow through on your list.