

Experiencing
THE BIBLE AGAIN
FOR THE FIRST TIME

LETTER TO THE PARTICIPANT

Dear Biblical Companion:

That's right: I do think of you as a biblical companion. Perhaps you already know that the word companion has its origins in two Latin words: *cum*, which means "together," and *panis*, which means "bread." Companions are those who break bread together. As soon as I hear that definition, I am immediately drawn to images of bread being broken and shared in biblical stories. I mention here just one of those: Luke's telling of the moment when two of Jesus' companions were walking back home in terrible unseeing shock following the execution of Jesus in Jerusalem, and were joined by a third traveller who accepted the hospitality of their home for the night and broke bread with them at the evening meal. "He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight."

I think of these small group sessions as times of breaking and sharing bread together. Who knows where each of you will have come from before each session and what kind of space you will be in! I bet if you were to ask around the circle at the beginning of each one of the ten sessions, you'd hear the whole gamut of human emotion being expressed: disappointment, satisfaction, loss, anxiety, hopefulness, caution, amazement, and so on. Sometimes, we don't know that we've come to something to have our eyes opened, but my hunch is that many people who sign on for this program are doing it because, either consciously or unconsciously, they want an eye-opening experience and they want to recognize something amazing beyond the physical reality of the bread. After all, the cry of the culture in our time is, "I yearn for something deeper!"

I didn't include bread in the preparation instructions for each session, but now that I'm writing to you in this way I'm thinking that it would have been a good idea to have the group facilitator bring a loaf of bread to each gathering and to break it as part of the opening time. It would be a way of saying out loud to one another, "I'm here to have my eyes opened. I'm here for profound experiences of recognition. I'm here for the kind of holy revelation that vanishes just when you have seen it, but lingers for a lifetime." That's what this is all about. One more group in all the thousands of years of biblical engagement, gathering to pay reverential attention to the Bible's sacred accumulation of ordinary and extraordinary folks who also yearned and lost their vision and gained their vision and recognized and were amazed and broke bread...

Everything you need to participate in the conversation and the program is between the covers of this handbook. Perhaps what you might consider is bringing the bread.

In anticipation of amazement,

Tim Scorer

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FOREWORD

I am pleased to be collaborating once again with Tim Scorer in this program of adult theological re-education for use in congregations. This is our second such collaboration. The first was a 12-session program developed by Tim based on my book *The Heart of Christianity*, called *Experiencing the Heart of Christianity*. Published in 2005, his book-length guide has been used in hundreds (perhaps even thousands) of congregations in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

I have heard from many of these congregations, and they uniformly praise the excellence of the program that Tim designed. Their testimony confirms what I wrote about him in the preface to that volume: “Tim Scorer is a superb educator. He understands both the intellectual and experiential dimensions of the Christian life extremely well. He is conceptually gifted. And he is especially gifted in small group formation and process.”

That book, which I sometimes think of as a Christian “primer,” treated what we see as the central understandings and emphases of the Christian life. What does it mean to be Christian in our time, in our particular cultural setting?

This book, this program of study, is designed to introduce Christians and inquirers to the Bible and to its role in the Christian life. It is based on my book *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*. As the title suggests, adult Christians need to read and hear the Bible *again*. One reason is obvious: most Christians first learned about the Bible in childhood, and many have not been exposed to an adult understanding of the Bible. This is true in most generations, of course. But in our time, there is a second important factor generating the imperative need for adult theological re-education.

A Time of Paradigm Change

Namely, an understanding of Christianity and of the Bible that was exceedingly common not long ago has become unpersuasive to millions in the past few decades. They are within the church as well as among those who have left. The reason: the vision of Christianity that most of us over age 40 (and many under age 40) learned as we were growing up ceased to be compelling at some time in our lives. Most of us were socialized into a way of seeing the Bible, Christianity, and the Christian life that was shaped by what I call “an earlier Christian paradigm.” A paradigm is a way of seeing a whole, a comprehensive way of seeing, a large framework that affects how the more specific matters are seen.

An Earlier Christian Paradigm

Seeing Christianity and the Bible within the earlier paradigm has been the most common form of Christianity for the past three or four centuries, at least in Western cultures. A few of its features are much older. Treated in chapter one of *The Heart of Christianity*, this earlier Christian paradigm was (and to some extent still is) common among Protestants. There is also a Catholic variation, and the difference is not great.

Regarding the Bible, the earlier paradigm emphasizes its divine origin. It is the unique revelation of God. It comes from God as no other book does. This is what it means to speak of the Bible as “inspired by God” and as “the Word of God.” And this is why the Bible has authority: because of its origin in God. As the unique revelation of God, it tells us what we are to believe and how we are to live.

Commonly, this way of seeing the Bible’s origin goes with a second emphasis: it is to be read literally and factually. Literal-factual interpretation takes both

harder and softer forms. The hard form insists upon inerrancy, including factual inerrancy, and thus often finds itself in sharp conflict with mainstream science and history. If the Bible says something happened, it happened, whatever the findings of science and history might suggest.

The softer form does not insist upon exact and complete factuality. It can accommodate the Genesis stories of creation to modern science by treating them as symbolic narratives. But it still affirms that “the really important” biblical stories – including especially stories of spectacular events – are more-or-less factual: that the sea really did divide as the Egyptians pursued the ancient Israelites, that God really did give The Ten Commandments (and other laws) to Moses; that Jesus really was born of a virgin; that he really did do remarkable deeds, such as walking on the sea, feeding a multitude with a few loaves and fishes, and raising people from the dead; and that his resurrection was physical, even as it was also more than physical.

Thus, within both harder and softer forms of the earlier paradigm, the factuality of “the miraculous” matters. It is seen as a central element, perhaps even a foundation, of Christian faith to believe that God does things like this – that spectacular events like these really happened. God did intervene decisively in historical events witnessed by our spiritual ancestors as reported in the Bible. For many Christians, what is at stake in affirming this is both the reality of God and the conviction that God can still intervene today. The miraculous and an interventionist God go together.

This understanding of the Bible – of its origin and its interpretation – is embedded in an understanding of Christianity as a whole. The earlier Christian paradigm emphasizes:

- Believing in the Bible – as narrating the story of God’s spectacular acts in the past, as containing God’s commandments (of both belief and behaviour), and as proclaiming God’s plan and way of salvation.

- Going to heaven – as the most important meaning of salvation. The afterlife is central to the earlier paradigm. Though “being saved” includes changes in our lives in the here and now, the really important issue is what happens after death. Where will you spend eternity?
- Meeting God’s requirements – as “what it takes” to be saved, to go to heaven. This emphasis flows directly from the emphasis on an afterlife. There must be something that separates those who do get to go to heaven from those who don’t. This “something” is some combination of belief and behaviour, even as Christian denominations disagree about the balance between the two.
- Believing that Christianity is the only way of salvation – that it is the one true and saving religion. The earlier paradigm sees other religions as, at best, possible paths to God; and, at worst (and quite commonly) as “wrong,” as something from which their adherents need to be converted in order to be saved. This was not the only impulse or accomplishment of the Christian missionary movement over the last few centuries, but it was a major motive. In the words of a famous missionary hymn, “there are souls perishing, lost in shades of night.” People can be saved only by being Christian.

Note how this vision of Christianity shapes how the Bible is seen, even as it includes elements from the Bible. The Bible is seen as the unique revelation of God, and of what God wants us to believe and do in order to be saved – that is, to have a blessed life beyond death. Paradigm and how we read/hear/see the Bible go together.

I trust that I have not created a caricature. This seems to me to be the common Christianity, the conventional Christianity, of the recent past. Unless I am seriously mistaken (which is always possible), some form of this is what most of us learned not so long ago. This is the understanding of Christianity that our par-

ents and ancestors learned and believed. For many of them, it worked, in that it mediated a sense of the reality of God and how to live. It nourished their lives.

And it is still present, numerically, among a majority of Christians in North America, especially among those commonly called “conservative” Christians – whether fundamentalist, evangelical, or Pentecostal.

But, as mentioned earlier, for millions of Christians today, the earlier paradigm’s central affirmations have become difficult, even incredible.

An Emerging Christian Paradigm

In this program of study and experience, you will encounter a different paradigm, an emerging paradigm, for seeing the Bible and the Christian life. This way of seeing has been emerging for a long time. Its roots lie in the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, the watershed that separates the modern world from the pre-modern world. The Enlightenment was marked above all by the birth of modern science and scientific ways of knowing. It affected not only our understanding of nature, but also of history and of ourselves.

Though the Enlightenment has shortcomings (including a tendency to reduce reality to what can be verified using the methods of science), its ways of knowing and seeing have been a great boon to our understanding of the Bible and of Christianity. As long as we resist its reductionistic forms, it provides a way of seeing the Bible and Christianity that is persuasive and compelling.

The Bible and the Christian Life

To say the obvious, the Bible is the foundation of the Christian tradition. It has an extraordinarily high status for Christians. It is the Word of God, the revelation of God, expressed in words, in the *human* words of ancient Israel and early Christianity. Only Jesus – the Word become flesh, the Word of God embodied

in a human life – has a higher status for Christians as the decisive revelation of God’s character and passion. And, of course, we know about Jesus primarily through the Bible.

This program of study involves both learning and formation. In terms of learning, in this program, as in the book on which it is based, you will learn about the most central portions of the Bible. From the Jewish Bible, the Christian Old Testament, you will learn about:

- The Torah, the first five books of the Bible, also known as “the Law” and “the Pentateuch.” The first portion of the Bible to become sacred, these books contain ancient Israel’s stories of beginnings – of all that is, and of Israel in particular. The Torah narrates Israel’s stories of her ancestors, followed by her primal story, the most important story she knew: the exodus from Egypt and God’s covenant with the ancient Hebrews at Mt. Sinai. In the Torah, we hear God’s passion for liberation, justice, and a way of life radically different from life under the Pharaohs who commonly rule this world.
- The Prophets, the second portion of the Old Testament to become sacred. These books narrate the rise, failure, and fall of the monarchy in Israel. They also include the prophetic indictment of the monarchy and the prophetic hope for a very different kind of world. In them, as in the Torah, we hear God’s passion for a world of justice and peace in which, to echo words from the prophet Micah, no one will be afraid.
- The Wisdom literature of ancient Israel, central to The Writings, the third portion of the Old Testament. Here we hear ancient Israel’s passionate reflections about “the Way” – the way of living in relationship to God, and the difference that makes for our lives.

From the New Testament, you will learn about its central figures and documents. These include the gospels, Paul, and the book of Revelation.

- The gospels combine early Christian memories of Jesus with testimony to his significance for early Christian communities in the last third of the first century. They are to the New Testament what the Torah is to the Old Testament.
- The letters of Paul reveal the passion of Paul, and life within the communities that he founded and to which he wrote.
- Revelation (known in Catholic circles as The Apocalypse) graphically describes the conflict between Empire and the Lordship of Jesus.

This program of study about the Bible is also about Christian formation. Formation involves more than learning, more than information. Formation means to be shaped, to be formed, by the Bible. To use a word play, the purpose of this program of study is not just information as learning, important as that is. Rather, it is about being in-formed – shaped on the inside by what one learns.

Indeed, the purpose of immersion in the study of the Bible is to be re-shaped, to be re-formed. All of us were initially formed by growing up within what my colleague Dominic Crossan and I call “the normalcy of civilization.” The phrase refers to the conventional wisdom common to most (all?) cultures. Though the specific content varies from culture to culture, its common characteristics include the domination of the many by a few, the legitimization of violence, and “measuring up” as the basis of identity and as the task of life. The primary voices of the Bible speak of a very different vision of life, one that we very much need to hear and be formed by. To be Christian is to be shaped by the biblical vision of how things are and of how they *can* be.

Sharing the Christian Journey

I conclude with words I also used in my preface to *Experiencing the Heart of Christianity*. Beginning a couple of decades ago, what is sometimes called “the small group movement” is making a significant impact in the life of many congregations today. These small groups provide a context for Christians to share their faith journeys in a community of intimacy and companionship.

In my experience, Christians are deeply nourished by such sharing. Yet many report that their church has provided little opportunity to share in this way. This guide provides such an opportunity. One of its major strengths is its use of an interactive approach that integrates education about Christianity with intimate sharing of the group’s lived experience, and with worship. As I mentioned earlier, Tim Scorer is a masterful architect of group formation and group process. Participants will find themselves drawn into an exploration of their own religious and spiritual journeys in the context of re-education about what it means to be Christian.

The development of intimate communities of sharing is analogous to what we know of earliest Christianity, especially as we see it in the letters of Paul. What we somewhat misleadingly call the “churches” of Paul were small communities, perhaps as small as ten or 20 people. Their size fostered intimacy as their members learned together what it meant to follow Jesus, “to be imitators of Christ,” as Paul put it. They came to know each other well and became a community of support for each other, even as they also became an “alternative community,” a group of people living with a different Lord and vision of life. In our time, Christians can be greatly nourished and strengthened by a similar experience.

And so I strongly commend this program of study. Not only is it an exceedingly fine tool for communicating an emerging vision of the Bible and Christianity, but, even more importantly, it is a means for embodying it.

PREFACE

I have the very good fortune to be able to spend as much time as I choose facilitating small group learning processes, mostly in faith communities and education centres. Small groups in congregations are hotbeds of transformation largely because they attract people who are yearning for more depth of spiritual engagement and less distraction by those things that really are not as important as our culture would have us believe. However, there is a risk that small groups themselves can become distractions from our call to be involved in the world, or as Marcus Borg says, “working to have things be the way they would if God were in charge and the rulers of this world were not.” That’s why I think that experiential learning is so important. It seems to me that in its engagement of the whole person – head, heart, gut, and experience – there is more chance that the spirit of transformation will find an opening and meet each individual in that place of yearning that ultimately will not be denied.

The writing of Marcus Borg presents us with truly accessible scholarship as a basis for good experiential learning. In addition to the brilliance of his mind, Borg offers us the vulnerability of his own life experience with all its transformational twists and turns. How easy it is for an experiential educator to take this combination of scholarly clarity and personal pilgrimage and shape processes of learning in and around it! I had the privilege of translating *The Heart of Christianity* into a study, and later this year will do the same with Borg’s recently published, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*. This text, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*, offers both educator and group participant a remarkable adventure into a sacred text that for some has become stale, and for many others unpersuasive, if not irrelevant. How will you seize the opportunity offered by both Borg’s book and this study guide to provide eager learners with the transformative experience that

the Bible still promises and certainly can deliver? Let me suggest ten operating principles that you might choose as your discipline of leadership for this time.

TEN OPERATING PRINCIPLES FOR LEADERS OF THIS PROGRAM

1. *Approach this leadership task as an adventure*

On an adventure, you can expect the views to be fresh and engaging, the path to be marked out (but still full of surprises), and the encounters to be spontaneous and enlightening. All seasoned explorers know the importance of being well prepared. With this study guide in hand, you can be well prepared for the adventure with a minimum of fuss and bother.

2. *Be centred in God*

Be intentional about inviting and welcoming God's accompaniment with you when you are leading the program. Choose two or three simple spiritual practices that will ensure that you can come back to "God centredness" whenever you find yourself wandering. For example, take a moment in silence to bring your attention to the candle that is burning on the table in the centre of the group. Think of the candle as a sign of God's presence. In your imagination, connect that candlelight with the light of God that is a fire within you. Give thanks for the light and for God's accompaniment. Another way of maintaining that God centredness is to think of yourself as one listening to God as you listen to the other members of the group.

3. *Create the program*

The program is not the *Leader's Guide* that you have in your hands right now. The program is what you create together with the group members who have chosen to learn with you. The *Leader's Guide* and *Participant Handbook* are only maps to the journey. Every group that uses these maps will have a different experience. Your task is to be fully present to this learning community, of which you are a part, and to facilitate their learning journey.

The most obvious way you are creating the program is in choosing how much time to allot to each section of the ten sessions. It's really up to you, through your attentiveness to the participants and the desired outcomes of the session, to determine how much time to spend on each part.

4. *Trust the participants*

These are the right people to be with you for these ten sessions. Listen carefully to what they have to say, so that you build relationship with them based on matters of real concern. As the sessions go along and trust deepens, you will feel more confident to make adjustments within the program to respond to the expressed needs of the group members, and participants will feel more confident in your capacity to make those changes "on the run."

5. *Take time for reflection*

At the end of every session, you will find the same four ways of reflecting on the session that you just led (Leadership, Participants, Outcomes, and God-Aware). These intentionally have the same focus for each session. By following a discipline of reflection using these four categories, you will have the opportunity of seeing movement and formation in your own leadership. We live in a culture that is drawn to "experience" more than "reflection." Intentional reflection is a spiritual practice. It is truly worth taking the time!

6. *Open yourself to a renewed relationship with the Bible*

It's true: we often do find ourselves teaching what we most need to learn. We may not know it until after the teaching is over and we sit back and say something like, "I had no idea how much I would learn from teaching this program!" Set aside the ideas you hold about your current relationship with the Bible and be open to something happening that could be transformative in your own spiritual and faith journey.

7. *Hold in deep respect the Bible-makers of all times*

The Bible is a human record of relationship with God, and as such, provides us with a remarkable document for deepening our own relationship with divine mystery. When we hold that perspective, it can make for a very compelling journey of spiritual exploration in the context of 21st-century realities. When we come before a group that we are leading with that kind of attitude, it provides a place of security and centredness on which the members of the group can stand no matter what history and bias they may bring to the Bible themselves.

8. *Trust your intuition*

Intuition is a word that refers to the Spirit alive within us. Sometimes we don't really honour our intuitive sense of things. Later, we might say something like, "I just knew I should have done that. Next time, I'll follow my instincts." When we are moving too quickly, we don't allow our intuitive sense of things to come to full awareness within us. When we do take the time to listen to our inner voice, we continue to build trust in that intuitive sense. In the context of this program leadership, stop periodically to ask yourself key questions such as: "What is my intuition telling me is the best thing to do next?" or "What is my intuition telling me are the priorities for this session, given the focus of the chapter and where the group is in its life together?" A word on behalf of balance: it's really important to bring balance to intuition with good hard data, so that you just don't take off on flights of fancy! It may be really important to look at the facts before making a final decision; just don't deny the voice of Spirit in the face of factuality.

9. *Don't be afraid*

At times, you may feel justifiably anxious or nervous about some aspect of your leadership. All leaders do. Anxiety and nervousness are rooted in things that you can change, like being more prepared, or having a conversation with someone who is always interrupting others in the group. Being afraid is quite different. Being afraid is about living fearfully; it's about

being dominated by a pervasive fear that something negative is going to happen regardless of what you do. Jesus is reported to have given this instruction more than any other: “Don’t be afraid.” Find a story in the New Testament where Jesus says this to someone. Hear the words and hold the image of that story for the times when you feel fear rising.

10. Think of this as leadership for transformation

The intention of Bible study is to transform people’s lives. It’s to bring participants into deeper relationship with God. When you think of your leadership as transformational rather than informational, it will change everything you do. Begin by believing that what you are offering will really make a difference in the lives of those who participate. Think of your leadership as being a way for God’s compassion for life and God’s passion for justice to be known more deeply in just one more place.

INTRODUCTION

I. WHEN A BOOK IS THE STARTING POINT...

What do you do with a book that is given as the “text for the course”?

I recognize a tendency in myself to want to “master the text” or “learn the book.” I suspect this is a leftover from school days, when there were questions at the end of each chapter to be answered, and when success meant being able to respond accurately to each question. Such a methodology assumes a particular approach to learning that is more about accurately passing on information and ideas from the author than it is about stimulating thought and insight in the learner.

It would be possible to write that kind of study guide for *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001). This book is packed with ideas and, if Marcus Borg is anything, he is a master of clear presentation. It would be very easy to write 20 questions for each chapter and to engage groups of adults in responding to those questions:

- What are the three main themes in this chapter?
- What challenges did the prophets of Israel issue against the powerful?
- How does Borg define a “domination system”?

If that’s the kind of study guide you are looking for, go no further with this one!

The approach I take is to assume that each person will purchase their own copy of *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* and will come to each session having read the given chapter. Experience tells me that they will be highly stimulated by what Borg has written and that they will be eager to talk with others about Borg’s presentation and their personal response to him. They will also be keen to hear what others make of ideas that may seem anything from mildly challenging to wildly outrageous. A very typical response to Borg’s

teaching is, “Why didn’t someone tell me this before? I needed to hear this years ago!”

I trust people to deal with the content of the book. What I’m most interested in working with is the energy of people’s responses to ideas that connect powerfully to the most important concerns of their lives. An accurate regurgitation of Borg’s teaching is not nearly as promising or meaningful as an energetic engagement at the place where his heart-offered teaching elicits a heartfelt response from adults in a group.

This is not a traditional study guide, then. It’s a catalyst for group process. It’s a resource to help adults find language and pathways that will enable them to explore the matters that are of greatest consequence in their lives. It’s a catalogue of possibilities to help groups of adults frame the experiences of their lives in ways that make sense to them as citizens of the 21st century. It’s a pathway into the classroom of Marcus Borg, a biblical scholar who knows that, ultimately, it is the truth within our own hearts that we must each know and name.

II. INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE FOR FACILITATORS

Speaking Personally: the DVD sessions with Marcus Borg

Marcus Borg has recorded a five-minute presentation for each of the ten sessions. The topics are as follows:

1. Reading Lenses: Seeing the Bible Again
Speaking Personally: The Persuasiveness of the Bible
2. Reading Lenses: The Bible and God
Speaking Personally: How I Experience God in the Bible
3. Reading Lenses: History and Metaphor
Speaking Personally: The Difference a Historical-Metaphorical Approach to the Bible Makes to Me
4. Reading the Creation Stories Again
Speaking Personally: The Importance of the J Story of Creation (The Garden) for Our Time

5. Reading the Pentateuch Again
Speaking Personally: How the Great Biblical Stories Retain Power and Meaning in My Life
6. Reading the Prophets Again
Speaking Personally: How the Prophets of Ancient Israel Have Shaped My Life
7. Reading Israel's Wisdom Again
Speaking Personally: What the Book of Job Offers Us Today
8. Reading the Gospels Again
Speaking Personally: How the First-Century Jesus I Meet in the Gospels Makes All the Difference in My 21st-Century Life
9. Reading Paul Again
Speaking Personally: The Heart of Paul's Teaching as I Have Come to Understand It
10. Reading Revelation Again and the Epilogue
Speaking Personally: Conflicting Visions within the Bible and How We Faithfully Live with Those

You will find that each DVD presentation is to be shown somewhere within its respective session. They are not used in exactly the same place each time. In all cases, they are intended to pick up on a particular aspect of Borg's teaching and give participants an opportunity to meet Marcus Borg more personally as he talks spontaneously about an important topic from that chapter.

Respecting the participation of group members

As a facilitator of experiential learning, your task is to lead people to a creative and, potentially, transformative encounter with the topic at hand. Think of yourself as one who respectfully "accompanies" participants on their journey of faith and spiritual formation. Think of yourself as one who sets aside what you think are the "best" or "right" ideas or answers, and who stays fully present to the truth that is being expressed by each participant. Think of yourself as a midwife of new awareness in each person in the group, including yourself.

The kind of environment you want to create is one in which people feel affirmed in their participation, not judged; one in which people feel safe to take risks, not "shut down" by fear of giving the "wrong" answer. You will create

such an environment not only through your words, but also through your body language. You can express respect, openness and trust as powerfully with your non-verbal communication as you can with your words. The most effective way to ensure that you communicate in that way is to carry in you a belief of this kind: *I am here to give guidance to this group as we learn together. I am open to being changed as much as I hope they are. I respect the capacity of each member of this group to be responsible for their own learning. They do not have to accept what I believe or what the author of the book believes. Their journey of faith and spirit is unique, and never to be repeated. I feel gratitude that I can be part of each person's unfolding story.*

Take time to write that kind of statement for yourself. It needs to be true for you: your words, not mine. What do you really believe about yourself as a facilitator?

A final word about respect: as I lead these sessions, I am constantly amazed and blessed by the new insights that tumble out of each session into my own awareness. In other words, this process is also transforming me. We, as facilitators, are as vulnerable to learning as everyone else in the group, even though we have this special responsibility of leadership. Nothing will express respect more powerfully than respecting our own evolving awareness in matters such as spirit, mystery, faith, and heart. What a calling! What a blessing!

Making the program designs work for you

I'm sure that if all the facilitators who will use this study were to stand on a line from "very experienced" to "just starting," we would have a very long continuum of group leadership experience. This study has been written with that whole continuum in mind. That means that skilled facilitators will look at it and say, "That's not what I would say if I were giving directions for this activity; I would say this..." Less experienced facilitators will say, "What a relief that someone has given me an idea of what to say here, how to introduce this activity..."

I believe that I am giving you enough content, whatever your level of skill and experience, to make this study work effectively for you. It does mean, however, that you need to spend time with the printed design ahead of the session to do these five things:

1. Make the connection in your own mind between the chapter, as written by Marcus Borg, and the intent and main emphasis of the session.
2. Decide, from all that is offered in the design, what the priorities are for *you*, now that you are getting to know the particular group you are facilitating.
3. Add to the design program elements that you think are missing and that you think would be important for you and your group.
4. Decide what words you will use to introduce parts of the process and to bridge from one element to another.
5. Estimate roughly the amount of time that you want to allocate to each part of the process.

Words in bold face

It seems to me that the most effective way of conveying to you what my intention is at any place in the program is to give you the kind of words that I would use and leave you free to use those words or your own version of them. The text in **bold face** in each session offers the kind of words I would tend to use at that stage in the process.

The truth is that I will use different words every time I lead the course, depending on a wide variety of circumstances:

- how well the group members know one another and me,
- how much time we have,
- how well people seem to be responding to what’s going on,
- the general mood of the group,
- and a perceived connection to something that just happened in the previous activity.

I expect and hope that this is also true for you, and that you will vary the wording of your introductions, transition statements, and instructions depending on your reading of the group and its members.

The other thing to say is that I much prefer to give instructions and to lead things, such as opening and closing worship, without reading from a text. As I said in the previous section (“Making the program designs work for you”), a lot will depend on your level of experience in group facilitation. The more experience

you have, the more likely you are to let go of the script and to improvise based on what's happening and the direction in which you want the group to move.

Words not in bold face

The text that is not in bold face is either instruction to you, biblical text, lists of supplies, or words related to an activity that you will be giving the group.

Paired conversations

Early in a session, I often have people go into pairs for some quick warm-up conversations. It's a great way to break the ice and to have people talking with one another about something they are bringing with them to the session, or about something related to the topic of emphasis. Typically the conversations take three to five minutes, depending on the topic given. I like to have people stand for these, moving quickly from one partner to the next. I use a Tibetan bell to signal that the time for the conversation is coming to an end; that way I don't have to shout to be heard above the babble of conversation. I will suggest topics for the conversations, but you can choose topics that you think will work well for your particular group.

Name tags

Working with a group of over 30 people, I asked people to wear name tags for the first few sessions. In a group of 16 or less, I would not use name tags, but I would build in ways for people to get to know the names of group members.

Living the questions

It's inevitable that a book that presents as many significant ideas as Marcus Borg's does, will generate all kinds of questions. Questions are not necessarily things that have to be answered. We tend to think that way because we live in a culture that values productivity, and answering questions seems like a productive thing to do! It is helpful, sometimes, to think of questions as wonderings, as indicators of where a person is in their own process of growth and learning. Encourage people to bring their questions to the surface and express them.

Here's a great way to do that in a group setting. Have a sheet of newsprint and some different coloured markers available in the meeting space. In each session, encourage people to write their current questions on this "Question Page." "Here's what people are wondering about," you will say periodically. Sometimes, you might take one of the questions and fit it into your process: "I just noticed this question that someone wrote up last week and I think it's connected to what we're talking about here. What do you think?"

Life is really more about "living the questions" than "finding the answers." This practice of "surfacing the questions" is a very appropriate one, because it is fully in tune with Marcus Borg's theology. I can just hear him saying something like, "I don't know, but it's a great question. Let's note that and come back to it later."

Asking for feedback

It seems like an obvious thing to do, but, for one reason or another, it often gets neglected. On a course that could go for ten weeks, there's a lot of potential for adapting to the needs, interests and preferences of the participants. There are some natural places in the program to do a kind of mini-evaluation. Right after Session 3 – as you come to the end of "Part One: Foundations" – would be an obvious place to step back and ask people, "How's it going... is this working for you... what would make it better... what would you like less of/more of...?" You could do a similar process at the close of Session 7, which marks the end of "Part Two: The Hebrew Bible."

You may be hesitant to open yourself to the possibility that people don't like everything that you are doing. But it's worth taking the risk, so that you can also hear how much they appreciate your leadership!

Going with the flow

There will be times when you know intuitively that it's more important to stay with a key issue than to forge ahead with the next part of the process. Knowing when to do that is part of the art of facilitation. In the context of this particular study, you will likely find yourself wondering, "Should I let this discussion go on, or should I propose that we move on to the next thing?"

In making this judgment, here are some of the kinds of questions you might ask yourself:

- Is this a matter of “head” or “heart”? There is a place for talking about ideas, but the power of this program is in honouring the heart, in valuing the lived experience of each member of the group.
- Is this matter that is pulling the attention of the group something that we just have to take time to speak about? Is it truly the place where this group might learn the most in this session?
- If we spend time on this matter will it mean that something else of equal or greater importance, such as good closure of the session or attention to another important complementary topic, be lost at a cost?

III. SESSION STRUCTURE AND FLOW

Each session follows the same structure:

**Intend – Prepare – Welcome – Open – Connect – Engage – Anticipate
– Close – Reflect**

The following descriptions are intended to clarify the purpose of each of these nine parts.

Intend

- This section contains the “intended outcomes” for each session presented in a way that you can imagine what the group might achieve through the combination of your leadership and the study process.
- Every outcome statement begins with a dynamic “-ing” word, giving a sense of what the group will be doing and achieving together.
- The wording at the beginning of this section always says “Outcomes for this session include the following...” This indicates that this is not an exclusive list of outcomes, but enough to give a general sense of the overall thrust and focus of the session.

- This section is for you as facilitator; it's up to you whether or not you share these intentions with the group, and if you do, how you do it. Some leaders, for example, might share this list in printed form, whereas others might make reference to some of the points during the opening time.
- Note that some people really like to have a heads-up on what's included in the session near the beginning; it helps them relax, knowing that things are well in hand.

Prepare

- This section outlines what you need to do as a facilitator in order to be ready to lead the session.
- The outline includes preparation of materials, resources and photocopying.
- Most of the items are the same from session to session and have to do with setting the environment for the group.
- One item has to do with photocopying, and asks you to ensure that participants have either a copy of the *Participant Handbook* or photocopies of the pages that apply to that session. It's really important that people have their own copies of this material so that they can fully participate in the program.
- Another item has to do with the preparation of the DVD player (see "Speaking Personally: the DVD Sessions with Marcus Borg" in another part of this Introduction to the program).

Welcome

- This section encourages a practice of hospitality. Words of welcome are visible to people as they arrive, along with instructions about getting together with one other person for an informal conversation as they wait for the session to begin.
- The topics for informal conversation either have to do with the theme of the session, or with some personal reflection on how the program is going for that person.

Open

- In this section, please include an invitation for people to drink from the water provided as they feel the need. Once again, the intention is to extend hospitality to those who have come to learn. Think of this water as real physical refreshment as well as a permanent reminder of what we know as the water of life.
- This section includes a prayerful opening to each session. A candle is always lit prior to a passage of scripture being read that is related to the focus of the week.
- Following the scripture is a litany that takes the themes of the scripture passage and expands and echoes them in a time of worship. The litany is not printed in the *Participant Handbook*, therefore the leader is given the instruction to let participants know what the repeated one-line response is.

Connect

- During this time, there are intentional opportunities for people to make a connection with one another. This is often done in paired conversations, and sometimes in small groups.
- This section addresses the need that people have to feel acknowledged and included in the group, not just once, but at every session. Once people feel included they learn more, because they are more focused on the goal of the learning and less on their concern about having a place in the group.
- The ways that people are invited to connect from week to week vary considerably.
- In Session 10, “Connect” has been renamed “Dis-Connect,” and is placed toward the end of the session to recognize the reality that, as the program comes to a close, people are “disconnecting” from the life of the group and allowing it to come to a healthy close. This is not to deny the reality that people may continue to be in community with one another in other aspects of the life of the congregation.

Engage

- In this, the most substantial part of each session, people engage with key topics in two or three different ways.
- The different activities of this section are not intended to be “options,” although if you run out of time to do everything, this might be the section from which to drop something. The activities are often sequential, building on one another to address key issues from that particular chapter.
- An attempt has been made to include a wide variety of activities in this section in order to appeal to the diverse ways that people learn.

Anticipate

- This section looks ahead to the next session and proposes ways for people to prepare themselves for it.
- This approach provides a sense of continuity between the sessions and can keep people engaged in learning about the Bible even when they are not at the session.
- This will always include a reminder to read the next chapter in the book by Marcus Borg.

Close

- In the same spirit as the opening, “Close” offers sacred words and actions to bring the session to a worshipful end.
- It always includes a psalm, or a reading that has the quality of a psalm.
- The closing sometimes includes a ritual that invites active participation from the group members. Even if it doesn’t, there is no reason why the facilitator of the program cannot improvise some action of closing that would add to the experience of the participants.
- You should feel free to shape the closing to be in tune with the way things have evolved during that session. If what is proposed feels out of step with what has emerged in the group or with the mood of the session, then change to whatever feels right to you.
- Here’s a place where music and song could easily be added to enrich the worshipping life of the group! Draw on the resources within the group

and within the faith community to make the most of the opportunity to sing together.

Reflect

- This is a guide for you, as facilitator, to take time to think back over each session in an intentional way. The same four perspectives are included for reflection each time: Leadership, Participants, Outcomes and God-Awareness.
- This discipline recognizes that you, as well as the participants, are in a process of learning. Your learning outcomes may be different from theirs. It's important to keep track of what is happening for you in the process of facilitating these ten sessions.
- You might choose to take this reflective activity one step further by meeting between sessions with a friend or guide and using these four areas of reflection as a focus for conversation.
- In the cycle of experiential learning, we can easily forget to include the last two stages of the cycle: reflecting and choosing. When we reflect, we note all that has happened for us in the experience. When we choose, we take the fruit of our reflection and apply it to the future with the question, "Based on what I learned in this experience, how will I do it differently next time?"

IV. ARTISTIC IMAGE AS OPENING FOR CHANGE – ENGAGING WITH ART TO DEEPEN THE SPIRITUALITY OF LEARNING

Artistic images and visual expression open up the human mind, spirit and imagination unlike any other stimuli. We have incorporated an opportunity to use powerful images in the learning process of each session in this program.

Included in this resource you will find ten poster-style images – one for each of the ten sessions. Each of the ten posters has been carefully chosen to visually and symbolically represent the key characteristic or theme of its session. Like all powerful artistic images, they could each be seen to have application to more than one of the sessions, or even to the sequence of all ten

sessions. You might think of the posters as a visual “text” that accompanies and enriches the book and the study guide in the same way as the DVD recordings of Marcus Borg do.

Rather than incorporate the art images specifically into the activities of the session, we are going to introduce these poster images as a feature of the pack and suggest ways that they might be used in the session to which they apply.

Creative use of the images

I will propose some ways that you might incorporate the images into the group learning process you are facilitating. I know that my list of ideas is not complete; there are many more ways that you might use them. As a way for you to begin to imagine the uses of the posters, here are some of my ideas:

- In the **Connect** time of the program, which is intended to help group members feel connected to the group and to one another, use the poster as a focus for one-to-one conversations. Ask participants to sit in pairs and talk about what they see in the poster and how they see it being related to the theme of the session.
- Use the posters as a visual record of the journey that you are taking together through ten aspects of the Bible. Ideally, you would have a display wall where the posters could be safely posted for the duration of the program. At some point in each session, you would add the “poster of the week” to the display, noting how it speaks to the theme of the week, and how it contributes to your group’s appreciation of the Bible in its entirety and in its parts.
- Incorporate the image into the **Open** time of the session, bringing it to the attention of the group in the same way that you bring them the reading of the Bible passage, the lighting of the candle and the responsive reading.
- Use the poster as a tool for integration at the end of each session. For example, just before the closing psalm is read, you could return to the poster, which you introduced at the beginning of the session, and invite people to reflect on the poster as a representation of what they have learned during the session.

- Use the poster as a transition from a time of “talking about” ideas to a time of quiet contemplation. You could put the poster on the wall and invite people to quietly stand where they can see it. Ask them to focus on the whole image as well as the various parts that make it up. You might ask simple questions like, “What feeling is elicited as you look at the poster?” or “Where do you find yourself in this image?” If it seems appropriate to have participants share their reaction to the poster with one other person, you could do that, but be careful not to have the poster draw you away from the focus of the session. The intention is to deepen people’s learning experience as described in **Intend**.
- Think of the poster as having a voice of insight to bring to the focus of the session. Ask people to “give voice to the image.” What is it saying about the topic of the session?
- Choose a passage of scripture to read aloud while people meditate on the poster image. They will hear the passage differently as a result of doing this. Such a process can help an old familiar passage be heard in a new way.
- Images like this can provide a way of deepening the life of the learning community. Ask participants to look at the poster, and after a few minutes, invite each person in the circle to speak about the meaning that the image has for them today. People are more likely to share something of significance with this process than if you were to just ask them to check in about anything in general.

Sessions and Images

1. Reading Lenses: Seeing the Bible Again
Once Daily by Paul Roorda
2. Reading Lenses: The Bible and God
Compline Saskatchewan by Perce Ritchie
3. Reading Lenses: History and Metaphor
Christmas Eve by John Percival



4. Reading the Creation Stories Again
Looking at the Stars by Margaret Kyle



5. Reading the Pentateuch Again
Untitled – Stories from Genesis (American Folk Art) anonymous



6. Reading the Prophets Again
Identity by Ben Shahn



7. Reading Israel's Wisdom Again
The Dance of Changes by Lois Huey-Heck



8. Reading the Gospels Again
Go Make Disciples by Gisele Bauche



9. Reading Paul Again
Travelling the Forty Days Road by Julie Elliot



10. Reading Revelation Again
Terms of Endurement 2004 by Jim Kalnin



V. LENGTH OF SESSIONS AND RHYTHMS OF LEARNING

Each session is designed to be no longer than two hours and 15 minutes in length. This means that an evening session might run from 7:00 to 9:15. You might find that most sessions can be completed without rushing in two hours. I believe that this length of session accommodates people's capacity to focus on matters of substance without becoming too tired. I prefer to fall short of using the full time and have people leave a little early, rather than rush to get done on time and have to go a little over.

When it comes to predicting the time an activity will take in an experiential education process, it really is difficult to be exact. You just never know when some special interest in a topic or an activity will be sparked and will

take more time than you anticipated. The task of the facilitator is to guide the group's use of the time, allowing the potential of an activity to be realized, while exercising judgment in making space for the diversity of activities and topics to be addressed.

It is important, therefore, that you are familiar with the design of the session before leading it so that you can make a judgment ahead of time about the elements of the program that have high priority for you. Then, if you find yourself running out of time for everything that remains, you can make an informed judgment about what to leave out.

Here are the principles by which I operate, consciously and unconsciously, when making decisions about content and timing:

1. *Drop elements from the program, or shorten them, rather than rush the process.*

When people are rushed, they begin to feel things such as anxiety, resistance, confusion and irritation. As soon as that happens, the quality and focus of their learning decreases. It is far better for the participants to learn fewer things and remain grounded, focused and connected.

2. *Make sure that there is a sense of closure both at the end of each part of the process as well as at the end of each session.*

There is the same sense of satisfaction in experiencing clear transitions and clear endings in an educational process as there is in music. Leadership of experiential education is, indeed, an art. People will respond with openness and energy when you lead as a sacred artist, honouring the human need for and awareness of openings, transitions, rhythms and closure.

3. *If you have to let something go, opt for leaving in those things that will maintain a variety of experience within the session.*

You will notice a considerable diversity of activities in each session: discussion in various configurations; personal reflection and writing, as well as sharing with others; creative activities as well as meditative ones; and so on. In addition to having variety of topics within a session, it is important in experiential learning to offer a variety of modes of learning.

VI. THE SIZE AND DYNAMICS OF THE GROUP

Options

These are the two main options I see in terms of group size and experiential process:

1. *Small group: up to 16 participants*

The group is seated in a circle and you facilitate a good deal of group sharing and discussion. During each session, there are times for people to break off into groups of two, three, or four, depending on the nature of the exercise. I think that an ideal group size is 12: small enough to generate a sense of trust and intimacy, yet large enough to offer some diversity of experience and thought. As a facilitator, once the group grows beyond 12 members, I begin to become less effective in tracking the individuals and the group.

2. *Large group: over 16 participants*

Once you have 16–20 people in the circle, dynamics change and you have to make much more use of small group configurations. This is because there are just too many people for the “airtime” to be shared between them all, and for the goals of the session to be achieved. It also becomes more challenging for people who find it difficult to speak in a group. I like the practice of setting chairs in groups of four before the session, clearly establishing those groupings as people arrive. In those configurations, people begin to check in with one another immediately. That’s their small group for the session. You can still have large group sharing with those groups of four in place.

At the first session of the program, I make it clear that these groups of four are the norm for the whole program. I also get people to agree to a practice of changing group membership every week. As people arrive, they not only have a choice about where to sit, but with whom to sit. Some people will undertake this as the challenge of seeing if, in the course of ten sessions, they can be in a group with everyone else at least once!

Choice

Your relationship with the group will be quite different, depending on whether you have a large or small group. When I'm working with a group of 30 people, I will not know as much as I would like to about what's going on for each person. You might decide to limit registration for the program to 16 and run two sessions, if necessary.

On the other hand, a lot of energy will be generated by a group of 30 people coming together to engage with the issues that matter most to them. The biggest payoff in using the groups-of-four model is the sense of intimacy and trust that is created. People express great appreciation for the opportunity to share in the intimacy of a group of four from week to week. It's something that doesn't happen anywhere else in their lives; they are truly fed by the experience and come back as much for small group as for the content of the program.

VII. THE MEETING SPACE***Location***

Because this is a small group experience, you might be meeting in any number of locations: a church meeting room, a classroom, a member's living room, the church sanctuary. The choice of space will depend a lot on the size of the group and on whether you are going to have the group in one circle or in a configuration of fours.

Assuming it's available, don't dismiss too quickly the church sanctuary as meeting space. Recently, I was fortunate enough to hold this program in a church where there was room between the front row of pews and the organ for a circle of chairs that included up to ten groups of four. There's something about engaging in the matters of this book while being in the atmosphere a sanctuary can provide that adds much to the experience.

Table

Place a table at the centre of the group regardless of the configuration you have chosen. On the table, place a candle and a Bible, and provide space for other symbols that might be introduced in the session. Sometimes, when a symbol is

SESSION

1

READING LENSES:
SEEING THE BIBLE AGAIN**INTEND**

(This is for your guidance: you can share aspects of it with the group at any time that seems right to you.)

Outcomes for this session include the following:

- laying the groundwork for the ten-session program;
- meeting and beginning to get to know one another;
- being clear about purpose, principles, and schedule;
- introducing a way of being together in these sessions;
- hearing the questions, wonderings, and concerns of this group;
- practicing listening to one another with openness and compassion;
- engaging with some of the ideas that Borg is presenting in this first chapter;
- identifying some of the important questions that we hope to address in this journey.

PREPARE

- Place water and drinking glasses on a side table that is easily accessible to all.
- Place a candle on a central table; have matches ready.
- Post the “Welcome” page for people to see as they arrive.
- Place a Bible on the table with the candle.
- Ensure that participants have a copy of the *Participant Handbook*.
- Prepare a schedule for the course that shows the date and name of each session. Make copies of this schedule for each person.
- Have a DVD player and TV or data projector ready to play the Marcus Borg video clip, “Speaking Personally: The Persuasiveness of the Bible.”

WELCOME

Make sure the following words of welcome and instruction are written on newsprint and displayed in a spot where everyone can read them as they arrive:

*Welcome to Session One, Reading Lenses: Seeing the Bible Again
Please find a chair and introduce yourself to another person in your group. Talk about what attracted you to this program.*

OPEN

Welcome to this community of exploration and learning. A place has been prepared here for you.

Since our concern is with the Bible, at the beginning of each session we will hear a passage of scripture and share in a responsive prayer.

Light the candle as this passage of Scripture is read:

Luke 4:14–21

Jesus returned to Galilee powerful in the Spirit.
News that he was back spread through the countryside.
He taught in their meeting places to everyone's acclaim and pleasure.

He came to Nazareth where he had been reared.
As he always did on the Sabbath, he went to the meeting place.
When he stood up to read, he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.
Unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written,

God's Spirit is on me;
God has chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and
recovery of sight to the blind,
To set the burdened and battered free,
to announce, "This is God's year to act!"

Jesus rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the place was on him, intent. Then he started in, “You’ve just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place.”

(FROM *THE MESSAGE* BY EUGENE H. PETERSON, 1995, NAVPRESS PUBLISHING GROUP)

Litany

Your response to the litany that follows is “God’s Spirit in our lives!”

ONE: We are here to unroll the scroll and know what is written for us today:

MANY: God’s Spirit in our lives!

ONE: We come to hear words of passion, a holy disruption for our time:

MANY: God’s Spirit in our lives!

ONE: Our eyes are on Jesus, who shows us the way to the Holy One:

MANY: God’s Spirit in our lives!

ONE: May God’s truth meet us with words alive in the circle of community:

MANY: God’s Spirit in our lives!

ONE: The candle is lit! May the flame of God’s vision burn in the spirited life of our community!

CONNECT

One of the key elements of this program is interactive conversation, sometimes in groups of three or four, but right now in pairs. You will have two quick conversations of about three or four minutes each, with two different people, on topics I will give you.

Paired Conversation 1:

Please turn to the person next to you for your first conversation and talk together about this:

Something memorable I recall hearing or reading from the Bible...

Paired Conversation 2:

Now turn to the person on your other side and talk together about this:

A person who had an influence (of any kind) on my relationship with the Bible...

Small group conversation:

In a moment, we are going to move into small groups, but before we do that it's important to acknowledge that there may be differences of opinion within your small group concerning the statements about the Bible that you are about to read. Later in the session we will be looking at some principles to govern the life of this community. One of them says this:

“Assuming that in this community of learners there is a diversity of people in terms of faith practice, biblical and theological knowledge, association with the Christian tradition, commitment to the way of Jesus, and relationship with God, we will practice disciplines of inclusiveness, non-judgment, and openness to learning from differences.”

As we move into small groups, is this a principle we are willing to live by during our discussion? (Wait for responses.) We'll come to the other principles later in the session.

Now, for this third conversation, please form small groups of three or four, preferably with people with whom you have not just had a conversation. This will require you to stand and move to some other place in the circle. Please form those groups now and move your chairs so that you can clearly hear one another and not be distracted by the other conversations in the room.

For this conversation, turn in your workbook to the page entitled, “The Bible and Me.”

Take time to read the statements on this page aloud in your small group. When you have read them, go around the circle and have each person identify which statements are most true for them at this time in their lives. Then move onto a general discussion about your relationship with the Bible. You will have 20 minutes for this process.

The Bible and Me

Which statements come close to describing where you find yourself in relation to the Bible?

1. The Bible is the inerrant and infallible Word of God. It comes from God as no other book does. “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.”
2. Because I can’t take many parts of the Bible literally, my participation in the faith community has been affected and I’m not sure that I really belong in the Church.
3. I’m staying in the Church while seeking a way of seeing the Bible that moves beyond biblical literalism and makes persuasive and compelling sense.
4. I’m very excited to be part of a faith community at a time when a growing number of people are responding positively to a more historical and metaphorical reading of the Bible.
5. I’m not as clear as I would like to be in how I see the origin and authority of the Bible.
6. I often experience conflict within myself about the Bible because I find myself with people who have opposing ways of seeing the Bible, but are unable to live graciously with the differences.
7. I have to take a stand when it comes to use of the Bible in relation to issues such as “creation versus evolution” and the place of gays and lesbians within the faith community.
8. Once you start questioning the historical factuality of the gospels, then you begin to undermine the very foundations of Christianity.

After 20 minutes of small group conversation:

You'll notice that you will begin a lot of conversations in this program, some that you might like more time to finish. It will be up to you to find ways of pursuing these conversations beyond the session time. Make the most of the opportunities begun here!

Come back to the circle now.

Once the total group is together again:

Let's take a moment now to hear about what attracted you to this program and what your hopes for it are. Tell me what you hope might come from this course and I'll note what I hear on the newsprint sheet.

Record in point form what people say on the newsprint, recording responses only once, even though you might acknowledge a repeated response when it is offered more than once.

When it feels as though you have received all the responses, call an end to the listing and make any personal response you might feel is appropriate to the list of "hopes" you have received. There might, for example, be hopes expressed that you know will not be fulfilled in the course of this program. Better to be clear about that right from the start, so that people are not waiting for something that will never come.

Having heard some of the things that attracted you to the course and that you hope might come from it, I want to be clear with you about the purpose of the program and some of the principles by which we will order our time as a community of learners. Take a couple of minutes in silence to read this page before we go on.

Ask participants to turn in their handbooks to page 4 with the headings, "Purpose of the Program" and "Program Principles."

Purpose of the Program

To gather in Christian community,
being challenged, taught, and inspired by Marcus Borg
in such a way that we might know the Bible
as a source of passion for living, wisdom in the Spirit,
and deeper relationship with God.

Program Principles

1. Even though our focus is study and discussion, we are first and foremost a community of faith. We will live our ten sessions together as an intentional community, including in our life together prayer, ritual, hospitality, and accompaniment. There will be an obvious congruence between what we are addressing in the book and how we meet together.
2. Assuming that in this community of learners there is a diversity of people in terms of faith practice, biblical and theological knowledge, association with the Christian tradition, commitment to the way of Jesus, and relationship with God, we will practice disciplines of inclusiveness, non-judgment, and openness to learning from differences.
3. Every session will stand on its own, so that if participants happen to miss a session, they can spend time in personal study of that chapter and not miss the content, even though they will miss the community learning process.
4. We will exercise a discipline of focusing on the content of the chapter of the week, not jumping ahead to future chapters, even when there may be a connection to the discussion of the session. The program will be cumulative; as we go, we will be aware of a growing body of communal learning to which we can make reference.

5. Marcus Borg is the one providing the shape and content of the course. Within the framework of concepts, ideas, and story that he provides, we will add our own content. The facilitator will take responsibility for the process of each session, inviting participants to make requests, give feedback, and take initiatives as appropriate.
6. Inevitably, as we consider matters of such significance to our lives, we may find ourselves wishing to be in conversation with a faith or spiritual companion outside the session time. Participants are encouraged to follow through on this whenever they feel the urge to do so. This may be with church staff, with friends in the program or with other companions outside the program.
7. When people share important aspects of their lives, they can be assured that those things will be held in confidence by the rest of the group members.

When people have finished reading:

First of all, is there anything on this page that is unclear to you? (Clarify as needed.)

Is there anything that you could not live with and that you would not be willing to accept as a principle for our life together as a learning community? (Negotiate changes and additions as necessary.)

At some point each week, I will give you an overview of what is planned for the session. It likely won't be right at the beginning, but it will be before we get into the main learning process of the session. I'll say a few words right now about what I have planned for this session. (See "Intend.")

ENGAGE

Engage 1: The Persuasiveness of the Bible

Play the DVD of Marcus Borg: "Speaking Personally: The Persuasiveness of the Bible."

Take time in the group for people to respond to what Borg had to say about the persuasiveness of the Bible in his life.

Engage 2: Seeing Ourselves at the Beginning of the 21st Century

Borg goes to great pains in this chapter to describe where he thinks we are as a modern Western culture. This analysis forms the background to much of what Borg has to say about different understandings of the place and meaning of the Bible in our lives.

But who do you say that we are and are becoming? How different are you from the people who created the Bible in the first place? How different are you from the generation of your grandparents, or even your parents?

Personal Writing:

Ask people to turn in their *Participant Handbooks* to the page, “Seeing Ourselves at the Beginning of the 21st Century.” The instructions are at the top of that page.

Seeing Ourselves at the Beginning of the 21st Century

Who we have become affects how we read the Bible. Who are we? Who are you?

Borg goes to great pains in this chapter to describe where he thinks we are as a modern Western culture. This analysis forms the background to much of what Borg has to say about different understandings of the place and meaning of the Bible in our lives.

But who do you say that we are and are becoming? How different are you from the people who created the Bible in the first place? How different are you from the generation of your grandparents, or even your parents?

In the space below jot down words, phrases, captions, images, headlines – anything that collectively portrays the culture in which we find ourselves embedded.

Small Group Conversation:

After participants have followed the instructions, ask them to get into new groups of three or four to share some of what they wrote in their *Participant Handbooks*.

Total Group Discussion:

After the small group conversation, ask people to return to the total group circle and reflect together on what it might be that makes the Bible “persuasive” in a time such as we have just described.

ANTICIPATE

In anticipation of the emphasis in our next session on the Bible and God, read chapter two in the book, as well as taking time between now and then to reflect on how your relationship with God has been deepened through the Bible. Use the journal page in your handbook entitled, “Knowing God through the Bible.”

CLOSE

In each session, we close with a communal reading of a psalm, either traditional or contemporary. You will find the one for this session on page 5 of the *Participant Handbook*. This psalm is from the book, *Everyday Psalms* by James Taylor. Read around the circle with each person reading a section until it is finished. Everyone reads together the words in bold.

Psalm 78:1–7 “Tell Me a Story”

If I say, “Once upon a time,”
Everyone knows a story is starting.
I do not know the meanings of my stories;
I merely pass them on as they were passed to me.
Only you can decide what they mean to you.

This is our story. This is where we came from.

When you hear this story, you must also tell it,
so that others may also know where they came from.

Our story is not limited to our own lives.

We belong to a long line of travelers,
snaking in single file through history;

**we bear with us the beliefs
the convictions, the experiences
bequeathed to us
by those who passed this way before.**

From Abraham and Sarah, from Rachel and Jacob,
From Ruth and Boaz, from Mary and Jesus,
we learn our family story.

Only by knowing where we have come from
can we know where we are going.

**Only by knowing who we are
Can we know that God is with us.**

(FROM *EVERYDAY PSALMS* BY JAMES TAYLOR, WOODLAKE BOOKS, 1994)

Blessing

Let us go from here carrying the light of this time together and living in the assurance that God is indeed with us, and we are never alone. Amen.

REFLECT (for the program facilitator after the session)

1. Leadership: As you reflect on your leadership, notice what you did that made a difference in the way that participants got involved in this first session.
2. Participants: As you think about the participants, be aware of this as the beginning of a journey of learning for each one of them.
3. Outcomes: As you think about what you set out to do in the session, notice what was achieved, both planned and unexpected.
4. God-Aware: Notice where the Spirit was visibly active in the process of the session, in the life of the learning community... and give thanks.