

LOVE IS THE WAY

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

WEEK ONE

Chapters 1&2: What is love?

“Love is the most overused word in the English language. It is confusing to everyone. Some people live their whole lives and never get it right.” –Jamie Maguire

Welcome everyone to the this first session. Read the quote above, and invite people to check in by sharing their responses to the questions below. Call on each person one at a time to share.

Connecting:

Invite the group to reflect aloud on these questions:

- What are all the times you used the word “love” this past week? Introduce yourself to the group and share one of those loves in your life.
- What prompted you to join this discussion group on “Love is the Way,” and what are you hoping to receive from this time together?

Close this section with prayer. You might do the prayer to the right in unison.

Covenanting:

We want to create an environment that embodies the very thing we are reading and striving to put into practice. So how do we want to be together as a group? Are there some practices we would like to commit to that will help us make love the way in our time together?

Let the group brainstorm. You might want to suggest some things, like listening attentively to one another, using “I” statements when speaking, allowing for some silence, and asking curious questions versus debating and defending positions. After brainstorming, rehearse the list with the group, and ask if each person can say “yes” to this covenant on how we will be together.

Bible Study: I Corinthians 13 (CEB)

This scripture is often read at weddings, but it was written to a conflicted church in Corinth. Each side was puffed up, presuming its way was better. Each thought it was more important, more right, more righteous than the other faction. This is Paul’s word to them:

“Love is patient, love is kind, it isn’t jealous, it doesn’t brag, it isn’t arrogant, it isn’t rude, it doesn’t seek its own advantage, it isn’t irritable, it doesn’t keep a record of complaints, it isn’t happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things. Love never fails.”

Loving God, fill my heart with the love that you freely give. Make love my first and last thoughts. May I love others and freely give to them. Make my spirit a spirit of joy, happiness, and love for both my friends and my enemies. Help me love abundantly as you have loved me. Amen.

*Based on John 13:34
DailyPrayerGuide.net*

Invite the group to reflect aloud on these questions:

- What catches your attention in this description of love?
- When or where have you seen this kind of love in action? What made it possible?
- What would be different in our church community if we were fully living into this scripture?

Video: Watch this week's video with Rev. Laurie Kantonen.

Depending on the size of your group, you may want to move into breakout groups/rooms of three to allow for deeper sharing.

Going Deeper:

Invite the group to reflect aloud on these questions (courtesy of author Kate Bowler, written by Erin S. Lane):

- "Agape" is the Greek word for love that seeks the well-being of another. It's also the same word used to describe the love of God in the New Testament. Therefore, Bishop Curry says, if we want to turn on "God's GPS," we simply have to ask, "Is this just about me or is this about we?" What aspect of your life is easiest or hardest to orient to this kind of love?
- Bishop Curry reflects on a moment during his mother's cold, winter burial when Mrs. Bullock pulled him into her and provided "a soft landing for a boy's suffering." Of that time, he writes, "We were always resting in the loving hands of our church community. Which is to say, in God's hands." When have you experienced a soft landing for your suffering? Who pulled you into their coat? Who held you in their hands? What did this memory memorialize in you?

Going Out:

Invite the group to share responses to these questions:

- What is your takeaway idea from this week's reading/video?
- What is one action step you will take this week in an effort to make love your GPS?

Closing:

Show "The Gift of Love" at <https://tinyurl.com/giftoflovesong> or read it together from #408 in the United Methodist Hymnal as the closing benediction.

Remind the group to read Chapters 3 and 4 for next week.

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WEEK TWO

Chapters 3&4: Can love really change the world?

"I don't do great things. I do small things with great love." –Mother Teresa

Welcome everyone to this second session. Read the quote above, and invite people to check in by sharing their response to the question below. This time, you might want to introduce the practice of mutual invitation where one person shares and then invites the next person to share and so forth until all have shared.

Connecting:

Invite the group to reflect aloud on this question:

- Where have you experienced a small act of love this week that made a difference?

Close this section with prayer. You might use the prayer to the right as your weekly opening prayer.

Covenanting:

Review the covenant developed last time, and ask the group if it still holds and whether there's anything they want to adjust after the last session. Ask them to say "yes" to this renewed covenant.

Bible Study: Romans 12: 1-2, 9-19 (MSG)

"So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.

Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.

Loving God, fill my heart with the love that you freely give. Make love my first and last thoughts. May I love others and freely give to them. Make my spirit a spirit of joy, happiness, and love for both my friends and my enemies. Help me love abundantly as you have loved me. Amen.

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DailyPrayerGuide.net*

Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. 'I'll do the judging,' says God. 'I'll take care of it.'

Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good."

Read the scripture slowly and meditatively. Invite each person to underline the word or phrase that captures their attention. Invite the group to share their responses to these questions:

- What is your phrase and why is it speaking to you right now?
- What does loving from the center of who you are look and feel like? Can you think of a recent example when you did that?
- What do you find as the greatest stretch for you personally in this scripture?

Video: Watch this week's video with Rev. Fred Vanderwerf.

Depending on the size of your group, you may want to move into breakout groups/rooms of three to allow for deeper sharing.

Going Deeper:

Invite the group to reflect aloud on these questions (courtesy of author Kate Bowler, written by Erin S. Lane):

- When describing his grandmother's cooking—and that of other Black migrants—Bishop Curry talks about "making do" and "making new." How could you participate in "making garbage gourmet" in your home, work, or community? What challenging ingredients have you been handed? What golden creations can you cook up with them? What will be your secret sauce?
- Dreamers may get dismissed as fanciful, ethereal, or naive but history proves that dreamers possess a certain tenacity. They're people who refuse to accept and acquiesce to the way things are and instead pray and work for the way things could be. Looked at this way, how are you a dreamer? What are the visions and dreams you are holding with tenacity?
- Consider Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 10 Commandments of Nonviolence at the end of chapter 4. Do these still stand the test of time 50 years later? How can the church re-form itself as a community of love grounded in these practices today?

Going Out:

Invite the group to share responses to these questions:

- What is your takeaway idea from this week's reading/video?
- What is one thing that you commit to do to help you sustain the energy to love?

Closing:

Show "Imagine" from "Glee" at <https://tinyurl.com/imagine-glee>.

Invite people to name one prayer they have for our world as their closing blessing.

Remind the group to read Chapters 5 and 6 for next week.

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WEEK THREE

Chapters 5&6: Can my
love have an impact?

*"The place where God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."
–Frederick Buechner*

Welcome everyone to this third session. Read the quote above to begin. In chapter 5, Bishop Curry refers to John Coltrane's album "A Love Supreme." For your centering time, invite people to listen to one movement of that album by playing this YouTube recording (the words that Coltrane used to inspire his music are on-screen): <https://tinyurl.com/johncoltrane-psalm>. Ask attendees to meditate on the words.

Connecting:

Invite the group to reflect aloud on this question:

- What word or phrase spoke to you as you listened to the fourth movement of "A Love Supreme?"

Close this section with prayer. You might use the prayer to the right as your weekly opening prayer.

Covenanting:

Remind the group about your covenant from session one as your guiding principles for this time together.

Bible Study: Matthew 22: 34-40 (CEB)

"When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had left the Sadducees speechless, they met together. One of them, a legal expert, tested him. 'Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?'

He replied, 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.'"

Read the scripture aloud. Invite the group to share their responses to these questions:

- Love God. Love your neighbor. Love yourself. Which of these three come easiest to you? Which is most challenging? Why?
- Jesus holds that these three are connected. Have you found that to be true? For example, has your love of God given you a deeper heart for your neighbor? When you have given of yourself to others, has it increased your sense of well-being?
- What would it look like if we truly used these two commandments as our daily guide for living?

Loving God, fill my heart with the love that you freely give. Make love my first and last thoughts. May I love others and freely give to them. Make my spirit a spirit of joy, happiness, and love for both my friends and my enemies. Help me love abundantly as you have loved me. Amen.

*Based on John 13:34
DailyPrayerGuide.net*

Video: Watch this week's video with Rev. Cynthia Williams.

Depending on the size of your group, you may want to move into breakout groups/rooms of three to allow for deeper sharing.

Going Deeper:

Invite the group to reflect aloud on these questions:

- Consider Frederick Buechner's quote at the top of the page. What do you sense is your unique calling? What are your gifts, big or small, that you do because they come easy to you and bring you joy? Is there a place or someone in need that would be blessed by your gifts?
- Bishop Curry, expressing his own version of Barbara Harris' advice, wrote: "Don't try to be what you ain't. But that doesn't mean you don't grow and change with life's experiences." Where have you learned to say "this is who I am" and to stand your ground on your convictions? How has it felt to do that? Have there been some life-defining experiences that have profoundly shaped you in ways you did not expect?
- Imagine it is the end of your life and you are listening in to those gathered at your funeral. What would they be saying about you? What might surprise you about the seeds you have planted in their lives? Is there anything you want to do more of or less of now while you still have the time?

Going Out:

Invite the group to share responses to these questions:

- What is your takeaway idea from this week's reading/video?
- What is a seed you can begin planting today in your journey toward growing deeper in your love of God, love of self, and love of neighbor?

Closing:

Invite people to close their eyes and listen to an excerpt from Henri Nouwen's "Life of the Beloved": <https://tinyurl.com/henrinouwen-lifeofthebeloved>. Tell them to let the words wash over them as if God is speaking directly into their heart. Read slowly, and allow for a moment of silence at the end.

Remind the group to read Chapters 7 and 8 for next week.

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WEEK FOUR

Chapters 7&8:
Who is my neighbor?

"If it doesn't look like love, if it doesn't look like Jesus of Nazareth, it cannot be claimed to be Christian. We are experiencing a fundamental distortion of Christian teaching of what it means to follow Jesus."

—Presiding Bishop Michael Curry

Welcome everyone to the fourth session. Invite folks to watch this Heineken commercial:

<https://tinyurl.com/heineken-ad>. Yes, it is a beer commercial, but it is really about loving our neighbor.

Connecting:

Invite the group to reflect aloud on this question:

- Is there a time where you felt someone made assumptions about you without really knowing you? Have you ever found yourself in a conversation with someone very different from you and finding common ground?

Close this section with prayer. You might use the prayer to the right as your weekly opening prayer.

Covenanting:

Lift up the guiding principles from your covenant as you center yourself in this time together.

Bible Study: I John 17-19 (MSG)

"God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us, so that we're free of worry on Judgment Day—our standing in the world is identical with Christ's. There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love.

We, though, are going to love—love and be loved. First we were loved, now we love. He loved us first.

If anyone boasts, 'I love God,' and goes right on hating his brother or sister, thinking nothing of it, he is a liar. If he won't love the person he can see, how can he love the God he can't see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both."

Read the scripture aloud. Invite the group to share their responses to these questions:

- What is the word or phrase that captures your imagination?
- Where is fear currently crippling you?
- What is the invitation that you hear God speaking to you in this passage today?

Loving God, fill my heart with the love that you freely give. Make love my first and last thoughts. May I love others and freely give to them. Make my spirit a spirit of joy, happiness, and love for both my friends and my enemies. Help me love abundantly as you have loved me. Amen.

Based on John 13:34
DailyPrayerGuide.net

Video: Watch this week's video with Rev. Dan Johnson.

Depending on the size of your group, you may want to move into breakout groups/rooms of three to allow for deeper sharing.

Going Deeper:

Invite the group to reflect aloud on these questions (courtesy of author Kate Bowler, written by Erin S. Lane):

- Martin Buber wrote, "Love is the responsibility for an I for a You." Rather than relating to other people as "it's" that we can control, we're meant to treat one another as "thou's" we're in relationship to. From this perspective, Bishop Curry believes, everyone is a neighbor deserving of our care. Who is hardest for you to see as a You? What small act of care could you start practicing toward them?
- Bishop Curry writes about the dance of nonviolent change in the church, country, and world. He describes this dance as learning to stand and kneel at the same time. Stand in your own conviction. And kneel before another's anger. Do you think this is an effective posture of love? What gestures would you add/amend to this description to reflect your own ethos of change?
- One of the challenges in our society today is that we tend to live in our own silos. We listen to media that reinforces our own worldviews. We gather in like-minded social groups. Which opportunities do you have in your life to build bridges with someone who may have a very different life experience or worldview than you?
- Our baptismal commitment is that we will be a community of love and forgiveness. How does our church live this out? Where could we do better?

Going Out:

Invite the group to share responses to these questions:

- What is your takeaway idea from this week's reading/video?
- One practice of compassion is to look at the people you meet with warm eyes and a soft heart. How can you practice that this week, and as you do, notice how that impacts your sense of connection and common humanity?

Closing:

Show the video "True Colors" as your closing invitation/blessing:

<https://tinyurl.com/truecolors-camdenvoices>

May we go forth to claim our true colors and to see the beauty of the true colors shining through all we meet this week.

Remind the group to read Chapters 9 and 10 for next week.

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WEEK FIVE

Chapters 9&10: How can love overcome what divides us?

“Let us put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children.” –Chief Sitting Bull

Welcome everyone to this fifth session. Watch this recent version of “We Are the World” to open:

<https://tinyurl.com/wearetheworld-voicesofhope>.

Connecting:

Invite the group to reflect aloud on this question:

- Where do you see and feel hopeful about our children showing us the way?

Close this section with prayer. You might use the prayer to the right as your weekly opening prayer.

Covenanting:

Lift up the guiding principles from your covenant as you center yourself in this time together.

Bible Study: Philippians 2: 1-11 (MSG)

Watch Bishop Curry’s message “Who Shall We Be?” that he offered to the church in response to the events of Jan. 6: <https://tinyurl.com/bishopcurry-whoshallwebe>

Then read this scripture:

“If you’ve gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care—then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don’t push your way to the front; don’t sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don’t be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.

Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.

Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth—even those long ago dead and buried—will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.”

Loving God, fill my heart with the love that you freely give. Make love my first and last thoughts. May I love others and freely give to them. Make my spirit a spirit of joy, happiness, and love for both my friends and my enemies. Help me love abundantly as you have loved me. Amen.

*Based on John 13:34
DailyPrayerGuide.net*

Invite the group to share their responses to these questions:

- Where are you convicted in the message of Bishop Curry or this scripture?
- What is the invitation to us as followers of Jesus?

Video: Watch this week's video with Rev. Susan Nienaber.

This week, break into groups of three so people can share more deeply. Invite each person to tell their story of how they developed their conviction about a matter that is important to them, and ask others in their group to listen deeply—not debating or defending their own position, but simply listening to one another. Each person will have five minutes to share their story, and others will offer a simple thank you in response. Coach persons to tell their story from a first-person experience, using “I” statements. This is not a time to convince others but rather to share how they came to that position for themselves.

Going Deeper:

Invite the group to reflect aloud on this question.

“Our stories have power. They have power to change how people understand the world—but even before that they have the power to heal the storyteller,” writes Bishop Curry. Consider your position on a social struggle such as racial reconciliation, care of creation, or LGBTQ+ rights. To borrow Charles Robinson's question, What is the story of your life that's brought you to that conclusion?

Going Out:

Invite the group to share responses to these questions:

- What is your takeaway idea from this week's reading/video?
- Bishop Curry's ask in his message is to bless someone you disagree with and someone you agree with this week, and to pray for our nation—that we will have the courage to love. Can you make those two commitments this week?

Closing:

Show “God of Grace and God of Glory” at <https://tinyurl.com/godofgraceandgodofglory> or sing or read it together from #577 in the United Methodist Hymnal as the closing benediction.

Remind the group to read Chapters 11 and 12 for next week.

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WEEK SIX

Chapters 11 & 12: How do I put love into action?

"We must discover the power of love, the power, the redemptive power of love. And when we discover that, we will be able to make this old world a new world... Love is the only way." –Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Connecting:

Invite the group to reflect aloud on this question:

- How did your blessing experiment go last week? Were you able to bless someone you disagreed with?

Watch "There is a Balm in Gilead" as sung by The Adventist Vocal Ensemble:

<https://tinyurl.com/thereisabalminglead>

Close this section with prayer. You might use the prayer to the right as your weekly opening prayer.

Covenanting:

Lift up your guiding principles from your covenant as you center yourself in this time together. As this is your last session, you might want to ask what has been meaningful or helpful about your covenant.

Bible Study: Colossians 3: 12-17 (MSG)

"So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.

Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness. Let the Word of Christ—the Message—have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God! Let every detail in your lives—words, actions, whatever—be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way."

Read this scripture, and invite the group to share their responses to these questions:

- What would others say is the song you are singing these days?
- Compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Which of these do you wear easily? Which is more uncomfortable for you?
- Is there an offense you are holding onto that you might need to forgive?

Loving God, fill my heart with the love that you freely give. Make love my first and last thoughts. May I love others and freely give to them. Make my spirit a spirit of joy, happiness, and love for both my friends and my enemies. Help me love abundantly as you have loved me. Amen.

Based on John 13:34
DailyPrayerGuide.net

Video: Watch this week's video with Rev. Ben Ingebretson.

Depending on the size of your group, you may want to move into breakout groups/rooms of three to allow for deeper sharing.

Going Deeper:

Invite the group to reflect aloud on these questions.

- Bishop Curry ends his book with encouragement: "So don't give up on love. Listen to it. Trust it. Give into it. Obey it." Are you at risk of giving up on love? Which of the above actions—listen, trust, give in, obey—do you most need to grab ahold of today?
- Now that we have read and discussed the entire book, what part resonated with you most? What insight will you carry with you?

Going Out:

The appendix of the book contains a process for developing a rule of life. If there is time, invite each person to work through this process as your closing activity.

- Identify one to three core values or principles that you would like to live into more deeply.
- Use the values you chose to write vows that summarize what the values mean specifically in your own context and your reason for wanting to translate them into changes in your daily life. Example: I vow to spend more time listening to others than I have in the past, for better understanding and to find better, and more loving solutions for the common good.
- Brainstorm some habits that will allow you to practice the values you identified in various areas of your life. Example: Every time I stop at a red light, I will pray for peace.
- Create a schedule of how you will build these habits into your life.

Closing:

Show the video "What the World Needs Now" as performed by Broadway for Orlando:

<https://tinyurl.com/broadwayfororlando>

Let this be our prayer and our commitment.

Read the poem "Continue" by Maya Angelou as a blessing/sending word for each person:

<https://tinyurl.com/continue-mayaangelou>