

A Seat at the Table: Facilitating a Bible Study for Adults with Intellectual Disabilities

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The Invitation

In Luke 14:15–24, Jesus tells a parable about a host preparing a great banquet for his invited guests. When the illustrious feast is ready, the invitees proceeded, one after another, to provide excuses for why they could not attend. “The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’ Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’ Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come’” (Luke 14:18–20, NIV). The trivial excuses aroused the host’s anger. His anger prompted him to send his servant “quickly into the streets and alleys of the town [to] bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame” as new guests (v. 21). Those who were originally invited were then denied a taste of the banquet; those who were not the original invitees became the recipients of the feast and consequently filled the host’s home (v. 24).

The parable probes ideas of status and societal productivity. Those who were initially invited ultimately did not attend the banquet due to their preoccupation with daily activities. Their focus was directed towards financial stability and security. Jesus subsequently emphasized that the banquet is for those who seemingly do not contribute to society in a productive way.¹ It becomes clear from this distinction of status—pertaining to undesirable occupations and ways of living—why individuals in the country lanes must be compelled. Due to their belittled place in society and isolation from city life, they may presume their invitation to the banquet is made falsely or is perhaps a cruel ruse altogether. Thus, the need for something beyond mere invitation mirrors “the increasing social gap that must be bridged.”² It is, therefore, the poor, crippled, blind, and lame who serve as an archetype for the broader category of persons who live with disabilities or are outcasts and marginalized: anyone perceived to be “lesser than” in society. The banquet becomes not just a place of acceptance but offers a seat at the table for these individuals to sit, receive, and contribute. Everyone who attends the banquet participates in it.

The parable of Luke 14 depicts biblical community for all people, especially for those who are often forgotten or excluded in society. Importantly, the Bible makes no distinction between those who are capable of participating as believers in Christ and those who are not. The mere idea that certain people cannot contribute to the work of the gospel is unthinkable in the Bible, so why is it prolific in our own societies? The work of Joni and Friends and *Beyond Suffering* is to rectify this wrong in our churches and in our world. If you are partaking in this course, then you are a part of this good work. You may have come to this point in the course thinking, *Yes, I agree that all people, regardless of disability, deserve a place in church and among believers.* But it becomes an entirely different point to emphasize that those with disabilities, particularly intellectual disabilities, deserve and do have a seat at the table when it comes to gospel work, biblical study, and even biblical interpretation. What does it mean to have a seat at the table if

there is no invitation to contribute to the conversation? Is it enough to simply allow adults with intellectual disabilities to sit and receive the conversation but remain silent? Or are we all called, regardless of ability or disability, to grow in biblical knowledge that leads to interpretation for our own lives?

Facilitating a Bible Study

Facilitating a group Bible study for adults with intellectual disabilities brings with it certain realities. First, facilitation involves inviting and even compelling the participants to take their seats as members of the group. Ingrid Bens, in her workbook for core facilitation tools and techniques, describes facilitation as a style of leadership that brings “structure to complex group interactions instead of direction and answers.”³ For Bens, as well as for us, this looks like providing participants with structure and tools, managing participation so all members are heard, and guiding members to identify and develop their own goals without inserting one’s own opinions, promoting one’s own point of view, or giving orders or demands to the group.⁴ This does not mean that management and leadership are entirely absent from facilitating a Bible study for adults with disabilities, but they are not the focus nor the objective.

To facilitate is truly to take a position of service. Though many believe leading a group, especially a Bible study for adults with intellectual disabilities, implies becoming the only contributor of biblical study, reflection, and interpretation. However, facilitation means presenting the biblical text in a way that invites others to contribute their views on God, the Bible, or their faith in a constructive manner. Facilitation is not necessarily *telling* the group what the Bible says; it is *guiding* the group to sound biblical interpretation and reflection. Those who seek to become a facilitator of a Bible study for adults with intellectual disabilities are those who need to take the position of the servant. We encourage, we compel, we guide, but ultimately the group’s members contribute to the study.

Second, it is noteworthy that this Bible study is for adults with disabilities and not for children. Adults, regardless of ability or disability, have a plethora of life experience to draw from. They know who they are, even unapologetically, and this allows for adults to bring themselves, their thoughts, their likes and dislikes, and their experiences to the table. Experience, of course, is not to be equated with intellect or mental age but is instead a mutual bond adults share and can appreciate in one another, as only time can dispense it. These two points will be of increasing importance to us as we consider examples of facilitating a Bible study for adults with disabilities.

Up to this point, we have discussed some important driving principles behind the need for establishing and facilitating a Bible study for adults with disabilities. These points are important for propelling us to create and facilitate a group, but some notes and ideas on practical strategy are needed to help us get started and to help us maintain a group. There are several points to be mindful of as you start to establish a Bible study for adults with intellectual disabilities. We will start with three key points to think about before you begin your Bible study, and then we’ll progress to remaining points that pertain to your already established group.

Before you begin:

1. It is important to clearly define the age bracket for group participants. This is important to specify, as it will determine who is considered an adult in your cultural setting. The traditional age of adulthood in the United States is eighteen; however, other countries define adulthood at other ages. When determining age requirements for the group, it is vital to consider the biological age of the adult and not the mental or intellectual age. Regardless of a person’s intellectual disability, adults want to be with their peers. It is most important to establish a beginning age for adulthood, but you may also provide a cut-off age for your members as well if you find it helpful (e.g., ages 18–40 are permitted to participate in the Bible study).

2. Given that this Bible study is for adults, it's important to make the group available in places where adults may hear of the opportunity to participate and join. Church is an important and obvious place to advertise the group, but it is vital to make use of resources in your city that can further distribute the information about the group to prospective members. Examples of these other resources include day programs, group living facilities, non-profit or government agencies, and even places of business willing to advertise news about the group. This outreach will look different depending upon your particular city and community, but it is important to reach adults with intellectual disabilities in their environment.
3. It is essential to consider what sort of accommodations your members may need. There may be medical needs or needs for assistance that should be addressed by the facilitator before the study takes place. For instance, you will need to be mindful of the Bible study's location in proximity to public transportation; accessibility of the facility hosting the study; communication about your study meetings (providing information in a variety of formats for those who may not use cell phones, who may still live with their parents, or for those who may live alone or with assisting staff); and whether or not the members of your group will need additional support with toileting or other personal needs.

Structuring the Bible Study

Once you have begun making plans for a Bible study for adults with intellectual disabilities, it is crucial to consider the biblical material and content you will study together during your meetings. As a facilitator, it is important that you have an aim or goal for the study. This is not to be enforced rigidly, because the study will need space for direction to change and to grow. However, it is vital that you, as the facilitator, know where the study group would like to be headed. There are important points to consider as you develop the study content for the group:

1. It is essential to ask the group what they are interested in studying during your meetings. Depending on your faith tradition or denominational affiliation, there may be expected or set Bible study curricula utilized by your church. Though these are invaluable resources to you, it is the duty of the facilitator to ask the group about their hopes and goals for the study and to guide them to select the appropriate content to reflect their wants and needs. This can look like choosing a particular topic to study within the Bible, such as grace, patience, discipleship, Christology [the study of Christ], etc. This can also look like using a book of prayer, a devotional, or directional guide for spiritual development. Or, your group may choose to read along with the church's scriptural calendar or select a book of the Bible to read through to completion together. The decision is and should be entirely up to the members of the group.
2. Another element of group spiritual development and reflection to be considered is the integration of spiritual practices in addition to reading the Bible. It is advantageous to any Bible study group to consider the array of spiritual disciplines available to enrich one's relationship with God. It is worth integrating exercises for prayer—perhaps the stations of the cross or prayer labyrinths—to the group's time of spiritual reflection. Other capacities for spiritual reflection and direction, such as worship through music, artistic expression in drawing, painting, sculpting, dance, or even theater can be invaluable resources to both deepen and express spirituality. This list is not exhaustive but does provide some important avenues for spiritual growth and development beyond reading the Bible.

3. As you and your group members determine the biblical content or spiritual practices you will explore, it is important to hold in mind the goal you and the group establish for your time together. Remember, you are their guide and facilitator, so it is your responsibility to uphold the aims the group has decided communally for their Bible study time. It is crucial the study remains flexible for all its members. If the group begins by selecting a book or biblical text to study, it is important to guide the group so all members feel supported, able to participate and contribute to the study process. As facilitators, it is not our position to make decisions on what is most appropriate or best suited for the group. It is our duty to create an open space for spiritual growth, development, and biblical interpretation available to anyone who desires to learn and know the word of God.

Tactics for Facilitating the Study

As you move on from establishing your study group and determining the content to study together, it is important to discuss some practical tactics for how to best approach the material in community. The points below include ideas of what may work beneficially for your group as well as personal examples of what has proved effective for the adult Bible study I co-facilitate. Though these points reflect study tactics that have been effective for the group I co-facilitate, they are but one example of group facilitation and should be read as flexible and adaptable tactics that can be changed to better fit the needs of your group.

Before we begin discussing practical tactics for conducting group study, it is important to issue a warning to facilitators: Do not underestimate the ability of your group members. Though we may have the best intentions, we are human, and we can easily make decisions on behalf of the group that do not take into consideration their capabilities. If we never invite the members to try, how can we know their capabilities? This does not mean forcing an individual to participate in an activity or portion of the study when they would rather not be involved. Remember, this is a time for studying the Bible and developing spiritual formation and should never involve coercing or forcing someone to partake in a group activity or practice. It is not our place as facilitators to assume anything about the capabilities or interests of our members. We are to create spaces for growth, belonging, and opportunity, whether our members choose to partake or not. There may be instances when the group members need a little encouragement to take part in elements of the study time, but no one should ever be pressured, forced, or given an ultimatum to participate.

In light of this warning for facilitators, here are some practical ways to constructively guide the group through the selected study. For organizational ease, this step-by-step list will cover what a typical Bible study meeting looks like for the group I co-facilitate.

1. **Reading the text aloud among group members.** Though I am hesitant to begin with promoting reading aloud among group members, it can be impactful for the members of the Bible study. Reading the text, whether from the Bible, devotional, or prayer book, is an important way members of any group can contribute to the community's growth and feel they are contributing to the study. However, reading among adults with intellectual disabilities can be isolating for those who do not or cannot read, so it is important the facilitator be mindful of presenting opportunities for members to read small portions of text aloud to the group without making this the overall focus of the study time. Allowing space for members to read invites them to participate in the group's understanding of the text in a way they may not have previously been invited to do in church. This should not be the primary foundation of the study group—to be able to read aloud the biblical or selected text—but it should not be denied to any member who would like to participate.

I have found that asking if anyone in the group would like to read a small portion of a Bible verse as we begin to discuss our selected text for the meeting is important for some members of the Bible study. There is no need to make the selected text very long. Usually a verse or two is all

that is needed for us to continue our conversation about the biblical text we are studying. When one member is reading, the other members know to be respectful and quiet. As the facilitator, you are there to assist the readers should they need help, and also to instill the importance of allowing everyone to read at their own pace. There are members of the group I co-facilitate who need assistance with reading and pronouncing words; those who may take longer to formulate the words or have difficulty speaking; and members who desire to read aloud but may need encouragement to read in a group setting. All of these adults are welcomed and given the opportunity to read the text aloud to the other members, and those of us listening do so with respect and patience.

- 2. Discussing the text.** This is an essential time for group conversation about the selected text. As the facilitator, it is important to present the information about the selected text to the group members in a clear way, suited for the individual adults' needs in the group. Though the group members have selected the text for the study, there is still a need for explanation, elaboration, and communication. The role of the facilitator is to help explain and define uncertain terminology for the group, to help communicate the text's meaning to the group and clarify confusions, and to help guide conversation by asking prompting questions.

Within the group I co-facilitate, we begin by reading the text, either all together or with certain members choosing to read to us, and then we discuss the content of the passage. Discussion time is fluid in order to meet the needs of the group. For those who are more visual learners, we will sometimes use images to assist with the text we are reading. These can be simple, such as an image of the cross, or can be characters from the Bible relevant to the text we are reading. Depending on the biblical passage we are focusing on, there may be confusion around certain terminology that we need to address. Also, if we are only looking at a verse or two at a time, the facilitator might need to provide some necessary context or background. Asking thoughtful questions can be a helpful way to stimulate thinking and group conversation. There are times when the group has been unfamiliar with a word, and defining the word leads to thoughtful conversation. For example, if the members of the group are not familiar with the term *sanctification*, how can you help them understand the term in the Bible and grow together in understanding? It might be useful to discuss the definition of *sanctification*, utilize visuals to help discuss sin and purification represented by colors or images, or even separate one small item from others to show what it means to be "set apart" to help reinforce the term.

- 3. Reinforcing the text with activities.** Reading and discussing the text are important ways to study the Bible, but they can also be difficult for adults who do not read or who are non-speaking. It is important to utilize different pedagogical or teaching tactics to suit the needs of the whole group. There is great benefit to incorporating other forms of spiritual development that do not rely on speaking or having a conversation within the group. These practices are not mutually exclusive to reading and discussing the text, but they should be utilized together to create a comprehensive experience for the Bible study and to emphasize spiritual development as it pertains to each person.

Within the group I co-facilitate, we have used a variety of methods for spiritual development. We have spent time in worship either through singing or listening to music as well as playing instruments such as drums, musical shakers, and bells to create our own music. We will often come up with an activity that allows for movement to go along with the text we are reading. Some examples have included using visuals to go along with the selected text such as the image of the cross or pictures to represent the Ten Commandments; drawing or painting different

ways we can serve our community and neighbors as believers; planting seeds in different soils when discussing the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13; performing a skit acting out certain Bible stories where everyone has a part to play (including non-speaking roles); etc. We have also included times of silent reflection, meditation, and prayer. The group members have led one another through the silent prayer labyrinth available at the church that hosts us, and group prayer is always an important and essential conclusion to our meetings.

4. **Prayer.** Prayer is an essential element for the communal development of the group. It is important to provide an open space for prayer requests to be made and prayed for by group members. It is equally important to emphasize to members that prayer can look different than bowing our heads, closing our eyes, and speaking aloud to God. Facilitators should encourage silent prayer and reflection as well as praying aloud together. However the members of the group decide to pray, the facilitator should support and encourage prayer within the group.

We conclude each meeting with a time of prayer in which each member is given the opportunity to ask for prayer and also to pray for their fellow members. We often have multiple members offer to pray for the group, and many also ask for prayer from one another. For those who are non-speaking, we provide small cards with a variety of images on them so members who do not communicate verbally—or even those who do not feel like speaking their prayers aloud—may point to the image to request prayer or pray for others. As the facilitator, it is vital to allow spaces for those who are non-speaking to contribute to the Bible Study. All members, speaking or non-speaking, have integral voices to the spirituality and development of the group.

These practical tactics are not exhaustive for facilitating a Bible study for adults with disabilities, but they do provide a place to begin. There are many plans my co-facilitator and I would like to implement in the group as the needs of our members adapt and grow. One idea is to incorporate sign language alongside the Bible verses we study to allow further opportunities for our members who do and do not use sign to communicate and engage with the text by moving their hands and bodies. Over time, the group will change, and so will the needs of your members. It is important that we as facilitators remain adaptable and flexible to best serve our group.

Concluding Remarks

When reflecting on the Luke 14 narrative mentioned previously, it seems that adaptability and flexibility are evident qualities in both the host and the servant. The host's frustration and anger cannot be overlooked as contributing to his need to adapt, yet his emotional response does provoke him to invite the uninvited to the banquet. The servant does not question the host's new instructions to go out to the city streets, alleys, and country lanes, but is flexible, obedient, and expedient. As facilitators, we too must be adaptable and flexible as it relates to service. We serve God, and we serve the members of our Bible studies.

In conclusion, as we reflect on the role of the facilitator and the call to service, it is helpful to turn to Thomas E. Reynolds's interpretation of the *imago Dei*. Reynolds understands the *imago Dei* in relation to disability as oriented most importantly toward "creativity with others, relation to others, and availability for others."⁵ Thus, to be made in the image of God means to promote, to initiate, and to support creativity and relationship in community while remaining available, present, and accessible to one another. In doing so, we not only emphasize the *imago Dei*, to which we all belong, but proclaim the image of God in community. With respect to our Bible studies, facilitation becomes the means for promoting the *imago Dei* among ourselves and our members. Therefore, if we are to facilitate, then we are to serve; if we are to serve, then we are to compel; if we are to compel, then the banquet table will be full.

Notes

1. Carroll, John T., *Luke: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2012), 304–305.
2. *Ibid.*, 305.
3. Ingrid Bens, *Facilitating with Ease!: Core Skills for Facilitators, Team Leaders and Members, Managers, Consultants, and Trainers* (Newark, NJ: John Wiley & Sons Incorporated, 2017), 1–3.
4. *Ibid.*, 1.
5. Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 177.

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