

Isa. 62:1–5
Ps. 36:5–10
1 Cor. 12:1–11
John 2:1–11

Gifts for the Common Good

Goal for the Session *Adults will examine and commit to Paul’s vision of the church’s Spirit-grounded unity and Spirit-sparked diversity.*

■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

Focus on 1 Corinthians 12:1–11

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Troy Miller

The idea that governs the remainder of the passage (vv. 4–11) is the need for and value of a diversity of spiritual gifts, though still within a unity. Prior to moving into a more detailed explication of this diversity and unity, though, Paul establishes the theological context in which his teaching is grounded. For Paul both the *unity* of source and purpose and the *diversity* of expression for spiritual gifts come from the Godhead, which he distinctly articulates in Trinitarian form. God is diverse and the diversity of the “gifts” (*charismata*, v. 4) given by the Spirit testify to that.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Lee C. Barrett

Those who truly are in the Spirit will speak and act in ways congruent with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Paul suggests that the Holy Spirit is not some generic mystical principle. The reference to the phrase “Jesus is Lord” points to Paul’s reliance on the simple and most essential confession of the early church. Because Jesus alone is worthy of trust and obedience, no other political, cultural, or religious lords can be the focus of the Christian’s spiritual interest. All who can confess that Jesus is Lord do indeed share this indwelling of the Spirit. Because the persons of the Trinity always act together, where the second person is so too is the third person.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Karen Stokes

All of this discernment, all of these gifts, services, and activities are activated by God for a purpose. Each person, Paul says, is given a manifestation of the Spirit to be used for the *common good*. In the culture that surrounds the church today, and often even within the church, individualism has been exalted to such high status that the phrase “common good” has nearly vanished from the lexicon. Paul’s words offer a refreshing, even shocking reminder that faith, while personal, is never private, and that the gift each person has been given is meant to be shared.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Raewynne J. Whiteley

Many of our churches struggle with issues of unity and diversity. This text addresses one aspect of diversity, that of the gifts exhibited in a community. Such gifts can be a source of disunity when they become the criteria for determining different ranks in the church, leading to a hierarchy of holiness. Here we are reminded that because the gifts have a single source, they are meant to be things that unite the community of faith. Gifts are used for the common good.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

**1 Corinthians
12:1–11**

Focus on Your Teaching

Do many of the adults in your group question how your church can possibly carry on its ministry in times of dwindling numbers and tighter budgets? Or perhaps, do some complain that few people do most of the work in the church? These are common concerns of many parishioners today. But sometimes, the size of tasks or budget limitations obscures resources already provided that make faithful discipleship and community possible.

Ever-present Spirit, open me to the gifts you entrust to me for leading this session and empowering my ministry. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- ball of string or yarn
- pens
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for January 27, 2019

For Responding

- option 1: Resource Sheet 1
- option 2: Resource Sheet 1

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome adults and introduce any guests or visitors.

Form a circle. Explain the following activity. You will toss the ball of string or yarn to someone in the group, holding on to one end of the yarn or string. As you do so, you will say that person's name and something you value about her or him. That person will then toss the ball to another, holding on to one end of the ball, as they affirm something they value in that other. Continue until everyone has affirmed, and been affirmed by, another at least once—and preferably more.

If you sense participants would be uncomfortable doing this, because they are unfamiliar with others or uneasy about expressing thoughts about another in a group setting, encourage them with “safe examples” of such affirmations: “You show concern for others,” or “I value your opinions.”

Afterwards, point out the “web” that now connects the group. Invite one-word or single-phrase responses to these questions:

- ✧ How does it feel to be so connected to one another through the gifts we each bring?
- ✧ In what ways might this “web” reflect the church's unity and diversity?

Leave the web in place on the floor.

Today we will explore how Paul viewed and valued the web of relationships that joined early Christian communities.

Offer this prayer or one of your choice:

Weave the words of today's passage through our minds and hearts, O God, that your Spirit may renew our vision of what it means to be your people in community and in ministry. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Greek words translated as “activities/working” and “activates/activated” are, respectively, *energema* and *energeo*. Look closely at those words: they form the root for the English “energy” and “energize.” The church’s “renewable energy” source is God’s Spirit.

Two of today’s excerpts delve into Trinitarian theology, as does this section of Exploring. Is the Trinity a concept you feel at ease leading a discussion on? If not, consider asking your pastor for guidance or even facilitating this.

**EASY
PREP**

EXPLORING

Read 1 Corinthians 12:1–11. Ideally, have each person read aloud at least one verse so that the sound of different voices reflects the text’s emphasis on unity in the midst of diversity. Invite the group to offer initial comments or questions evoked by the reading.

Have adults silently read over and study the passage as a whole. Pay attention to the “structure” Paul uses: the repetition of key words or phrases, the way he organizes thoughts in sections, and the lists he makes. Invite participants to respond to these questions—and perhaps, raise others of their own:

- ✠ What effect does Paul create for the individual listener, for the community, by the use of such structure and repetition?
- ✠ What do you consider to be the key words or thoughts in this passage; why?

Share and discuss the information in the sidebar as needed.

Invite the adults to consider what kind of situation in the early church might have moved Paul to offer these words. Summarize what issues were at work in the Corinthian community, and what Paul’s message aimed to do.

Distribute Resource Sheet 2 (Spirit’s Gifts: Then and Now). Form two small groups. Besides 1 Corinthians 12:1–11, assign each group one of these additional passages: Romans 12:4–8; Ephesians 4:11–13. Have each group use Resource Sheet 2 to list all the gifts named in their two passages, and then to fill in the other two columns for each of those gifts.

Gather the group together. Discuss first the listing of gifts from the 1 Corinthians passage today. Next, have each group identify the gifts listed in their additional passage. Identify and discuss:

- ✠ What gifts are repeated, and why might that be?
- ✠ What gifts seem unique to one listing or another, and what might account for that?

Distribute Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on 1 Corinthians 12:1–11) and review the “Where?” excerpt. Invite adults to offer initial responses to this reading. Lead a discussion on the following questions:

- ✠ What explicit references are made to Jesus in 1 Corinthians 12:1–11?
- ✠ How do those references shape the meaning of Paul’s words on the church’s unity as well as diversity?

Discuss: If Paul had been writing to your congregation, or to the church today:

- ✠ What matters of unity and diversity would he need to address?

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

1. **Spirit-ed Unity in Spirit-ed Diversity** Christian unity is not uniformity, but rather unity that takes shape in the diverse gifts of the Spirit. Read the “Now What?” excerpt on Resource

Sheet 1. Talk about specific issues where your congregation and its members struggle with matters of unity and diversity. Ask: What holds you together in the differences you experience? Recall the “web” created in Gathering. Ask: How might we use the diversity of gifts we enjoy as the basis for our unity as a congregation, even when we disagree?

- 2. Faith: Personal, Not Private** We are gifted by God’s Spirit as individuals for the sake of community. Read the “So What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Pay particular attention to the final sentence, and its affirmation that “faith, while personal, is never private.” Talk about the difference between “private” and “personal.” Ask: What examples might there be of hazards created when faith is seen to be purely private? Identify times and ways in which your congregation nurtures the “personal” side of faith. How might that nurturing help individuals to connect the need for personal faith with the need for community?
- 3. Identifying and Employing Our Gifts** Spirit’s diverse gifts in communities all need to be honored and employed so that their purpose of seeking the common good can be fully advanced. Lead a conversation around the following comments by Karen Stokes (“Pastoral Perspectives”) on this passage. Consider where and to whom ideas generated here might be passed on for further consideration and action in your congregation.

“This passage invites reflection on what gifts are valued (and devalued) in the culture of a particular church. Who gets invited or nominated to certain positions and roles in the church, and who does not? How are they identified and by whom? How can the full range of gifts be lifted up, supported, and welcomed into service of Christ, his church, and the world?”

—Karen Stokes, *Feasting on the Word, Year C*, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 256.

CLOSING

Periodically it is helpful to do a “midcourse pause” to review what has been helpful or what might be altered in the future. Invite comments that assess these past few weeks: in terms of the activities and discussions, in terms of the material being used. Ask: What has been most helpful? What might you like to see changed in the weeks to come?

Form a circle around the web on the floor. (If it is no longer there, invite participants to recall what the web looked like in Gathering). Ask members to call out words or phrases that reflect what they will take from this session about the Spirit’s gifts: for the church in general, for your congregation in particular. Commission the group by reading aloud 1 Corinthians 12:4–7.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for January 27, 2019, or e-mail it to the participants early in the week. Encourage them to read the Scripture passages and the excerpts before the next session.

Focus on 1 Corinthians 12:1–11

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Troy Miller

The idea that governs the remainder of the passage (vv. 4–11) is the need for and value of a diversity of spiritual gifts, though still within a unity. Prior to moving into a more detailed explication of this diversity and unity, though, Paul establishes the theological context in which his teaching is grounded. For Paul both the *unity* of source and purpose and the *diversity* of expression for spiritual gifts come from the Godhead, which he distinctly articulates in Trinitarian form. God is diverse and the diversity of the “gifts” (*charismata*, v. 4) given by the Spirit testify to that.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Lee C. Barrett

Those who truly are in the Spirit will speak and act in ways congruent with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Paul suggests that the Holy Spirit is not some generic mystical principle. The reference to the phrase “Jesus is Lord” points to Paul’s reliance on the simple and most essential confession of the early church. Because Jesus alone is worthy of trust and obedience, no other political, cultural, or religious lords can be the focus of the Christian’s spiritual interest. All who can confess that Jesus is Lord do indeed share this indwelling of the Spirit. Because the persons of the Trinity always act together, where the second person is so too is the third person.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Karen Stokes

All of this discernment, all of these gifts, services, and activities are activated by God for a purpose. Each person, Paul says, is given a manifestation of the Spirit to be used for the *common good*. In the culture that surrounds the church today, and often even within the church, individualism has been exalted to such high status that the phrase “common good” has nearly vanished from the lexicon. Paul’s words offer a refreshing, even shocking reminder that faith, while personal, is never private, and that the gift each person has been given is meant to be shared.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,”

Raewynne J. Whiteley

Many of our churches struggle with issues of unity and diversity. This text addresses one aspect of diversity, that of the gifts exhibited in a community. Such gifts can be a source of disunity when they become the criteria for determining different ranks in the church, leading to a hierarchy of holiness. Here we are reminded that because the gifts have a single source, they are meant to be things that unite the community of faith. Gifts are used for the common good.

January 20, 2019

Gifts for the
Common Good

Adult
Resource Sheet 2

Spirit's Gifts: Then and Now



What is the gift?	What purpose does this gift have?	How is the common good served by this gift?

1 Corinthians 12:1–11, Romans 12:4–8, and Ephesians 4:11–13