

Welcoming Community

Diversity That Works



SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

For use with *Welcoming Community: Diversity That Works* by Douglas Avilesbernal (Judson Press, 2016). www.judsonpress.com / 800-4-JUDSON

Week 1

Introduction: Living in a New World

Scripture Meditation

Read **Acts 2:1-21**. Imagine yourself a part of that crowd in first-century Jerusalem. Those listening had come to Jerusalem from all over the known world. The last thing they expected was a local Jew to speak their own language. How do you experience a similar paradox in your life in the world today? How might you experience the Spirit of God in both aspects of that experience?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What new information or insights did you learn about diversity from this chapter? How did it confirm or contradict your previous assumptions? What surprised you and why? What did you *feel* in response to the information and why?
2. Take a few minutes to recall an experience of change in your community—whether it was your own experience, that of a family member, friend, or coworker, or a story you heard from the news or social media. What do you know about the people involved and the nature of the change? What challenges did the experience entail? What does this story reveal about the human face of cultural shifts and change?
3. How have you experienced change in your faith community, if at all? What is exciting about that change? What is unsettling or discomfoting? What is downright scary or upsetting? Why?

Action Steps

- **Learn more** ... (1) Research the racial demographics in your own community or region. What cultures and ethnicities are represented? Where have they come from—geographically and generationally? How have your local demographics changed in the past decade or two? (2) Sponsor a Bible study that explores the Pentecost story as the early church's first foray into cultural and linguistic diversity. How was the Spirit at work in initiating the change? How was God present to help the new community navigate the rapid growth and increasing diversity?
- **Do more** ... (1) Reach out to someone who represents a different racial or cultural identity from your own. Invite that person into your home or out for a meal, and listen to his or her story of living with diversity. (2) As a church, connect with another local congregation of a different culture. Explore how your group can get involved to support these neighbors in addressing an issue that concerns them, whether through service, advocacy, or activism.

Week 2

Chapters 1–2: Identifying & Encountering New Realities

Scripture Meditation

Read **John 4:1-25**. This biblical story will be an overarching metaphor for this book study. Imagine yourself in the shoes of the disciples as Jesus leads them into Samaria. How might you feel in Samaritan territory, the proverbial “other side of the tracks”? What neighborhoods or contexts in your life today might evoke similar feelings? (e.g., trepidation, uncertainty, curiosity, resentment, fear, anxiety) Why?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What new information or insights did you learn about diversity from these chapters? How did it confirm or contradict your previous assumptions? What surprised you and why? What did you *feel* in response to the information and why?
2. How would you describe the Christian church of the past, locally or in the sense of the church universal? What was its role in your life and community? Where have you observed changes in the church and its role in recent years—at a personal, communal, and societal level? To what extent are those changes for the worse—and for the better?
3. In what ways have you experienced cultural and demographic change as an abrupt relocation into an unfamiliar wilderness? How have you observed the dynamics named by the author in these chapters (loss of clout, shift in resources, emotional baggage, and consumerism) at work in your church? How do these dynamics obstruct the process of creating community in the midst of newness and diversity?

Action Steps

- **Learn more** ... (1) Research some recent studies about the state of the Christian church (or institutional religion as a whole) in North America. Pay particular attention to dramatic shifts over time and to current trends that are specific to certain racial-ethnic groups. The Pew Foundation, the Barna Research Group, and the Alban Institute are three good resources for these types of studies. (2) Host a Bible study that delves deeper into the Gospel story about Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. Identify the ways in which Jesus’ decision to pass through Samaria might have been challenging or upsetting for his disciples.
- **Do more** ... (1) Engage interested members of your group in a discussion of the questions on page 21 in *Welcoming Community*. Encourage participants to identify the benefits and insights that might be gleaned from wandering off the beaten track of the church as we have known it. (2) Find out about how other faith-based organizations in your area are attempting to serve the community and “be church” in new and creative ways. Consider exploring conversations or partnerships with such groups.

Week 3

Chapters 3–4: Responding to Change & Hope from Our History

Scripture Meditation

Read **Luke 4:14-30**. Imagine yourself among the hometown crowd in Nazareth. Jesus is a young man whose parents you have known for years and whom you have watched grow from infancy to adulthood. Imagine the story in today's context, as if Jesus were the son of a refugee family you welcomed at your church, coming home after graduating from college to teach your church in ways that are somewhat familiar—but also distinctively new. How do you hear him? How do his words and his new confidence and authority make you feel?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What new information or insights did you learn about diversity from these chapters? How did it confirm or contradict your previous assumptions? What surprised you and why? What did you *feel* in response to the information and why?
2. First ask yourself, “What are my greatest anxieties about attempting to lead this group on a journey to multicultural community? What do I perceive to be the greatest obstacles on that journey?” Now ask the group participants about *their* greatest anxieties and what they perceive to be the greatest obstacles. Compare and contrast your answers together. Be transparent about your concerns as a leader, and be compassionate toward their concerns as a congregation.
3. Share personal stories about change, loss, and transition in the past. Particularly encourage those with long histories in your local church (or denomination) to share stories from that communal past. How has faith helped to sustain you, individually and congregationally, through those periods of change? Identify which experiences, skills, and lessons gleaned from that history might help the group now in navigating the wilderness that is with creating community in the midst of diversity.

Action Steps

- **Learn more** ... (1) Check your church's archives, particularly during notable periods in national or regional history (e.g., during wartime, the Depression, the Civil Rights Era). How did your church respond to significant events in the larger world? (2) Sponsor a Bible study that explores the Gospel story in Luke 4:14-30 more deeply, particularly as it relates to hometown history and accepting change in our neighbors and community.
- **Do more** ... (1) Plan a fellowship activity for your congregation which features a kind of living museum of your church's history in the community. Highlight the hopes and strengths evidenced in that history. (2) Identify current events or local issues that inspire concern or passion among your congregants. Brainstorm about how your group can take leadership in responding to those concerns.

Week 4

Chapters 5–6: True Belonging & Nurturing Diversity

Scripture Meditation

Read **Luke 18:18-25** about Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler. Imagine yourself first as the young man. You approach Jesus to demonstrate how you (and your faith community) are already doing what he's preaching—and to ask about joining him in teaching the rest of the world. How does it feel to hear Jesus' response? Now imagine that you are one of the crowd that witnesses the encounter—probably neither rich nor in a position of power. How do you feel listening to the conversation between Jesus and the young man? Why?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What new information or insights did you learn about diversity from these chapters? How did it confirm or contradict your previous assumptions? What surprised you and why? What did you *feel* in response to the information and why?
2. Consider the questions on page 49 in *Welcoming Community*. Answer them individually, in pairs, or as a group. How easy is it for you to answer these questions about yourself? Why? Why does the author assert that having a strong sense of self equips us to venture into new territory where diversity abounds? Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. Discuss the ideas of equality, diversity, and ambiguity as presented in chapter 6. How have you experienced these dynamics at work in the life of your congregation? How might the biblical metaphor of the church as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12) shape our thinking and relationships around diversity and equality in community?

Action Steps

- **Learn more** ... (1) Review the section about Miroslav Volf's models of community (pp. 59–60). Which model best describes your current church? Why? What might be needed to move from that model to one of solidarity? (2) Host a Bible study about equality, exploring the verses highlighted in the box on page 68. How might these definitions of equality inform your development of multicultural community?
- **Do more** ... (1) Cultivate the spiritual practice of hospitality. Be intentional about opening the church building and personal homes (or personal spaces) to new people. Provide opportunities to share feedback about the experiences, both positive and negative. What anxieties are proven to be well-founded and which are proven to have little foundation at all? What makes the difference? (2) Consider how to develop ministries of hospitality, ministries that expand your sense of home and belonging to others in the community. Invite those guests to have a part in creating a space that feels like home to them as well. (See pg. 51 for the four concepts that define "home.")

Week 5

Chapters 7–8: Walking in Solidarity—Through Samaria

Scripture Meditation

Read **Luke 10:25-37**, the parable of the Good Samaritan. Hear this familiar story through the lens of a more contemporary context: that the helpful stranger is a returning citizen, a homeless man, an undocumented Mexican immigrant, a Syrian refugee, an Iranian Muslim on the way to prayer. How do these modern-day analogies transform the story for you? Why?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What new information or insights did you learn about diversity from these chapters? How did it confirm or contradict your previous assumptions? What surprised you and why? What did you *feel* in response to the information and why?
2. When have you experienced the journey from tolerance to solidarity in a relationship that crosses traditional social boundaries? Perhaps that boundary is one of gender, race or ethnicity, generation, language, or ability. What allowed you to experience solidarity with another person? In what ways did that solidarity reflect what the author characterizes as “equality rooted in love”?
3. Consider which group of people might be deemed the “scapegoat” in your community or region. Does the blame fall along racial-cultural lines? Along generational or socioeconomic lines? What fears or concerns drive that desire for a scapegoat? How might your faith community begin to address the underlying cause and alleviate the inclination to place blame?

Action Steps

- **Learn more** ... (1) Find out what multicultural ministry models might already be active in your community or region (see “Measuring Equality,” pp. 81–83). Reach out to the leaders and ask about their experiences, especially in relation to the dynamics of solidarity, equality, and interactive community. (2) Contact your denomination or a local ecumenical organization with which you might research other multicultural ministry models that are working in communities that have parallels with your own (rural, suburban, urban; experiencing gentrification, increased immigration, shifting demographics).
- **Do more** ... (1) Develop a partnership with a local organization that is serving the needs of immigrants, refugees, or other marginalized groups in your area in order to cultivate a stronger sense of community and solidarity with such a group. (2) Host a workshop for local religious and community leaders that includes facilitators or panelists from various cultures in order to learn more about leadership styles across cultural norms.

Week 6

Chapters 9–10: Letting Go & Following Jesus

Scripture Meditation

Read **John 1:43-51**. Imagine how the story might read in the United States today. What neighborhood, city, nationality, or ethnicity might be the object of Nathanael's disdain today? Why? What prejudices do we have that inspire us to sneer at such a group?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What new information or insights did you learn about diversity from these chapters? How did it confirm or contradict your previous assumptions? What surprised you and why? What did you *feel* in response to the information and why?
2. Recall a time in your life when you experienced prejudice yourself. What was the basis of the prejudice (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, age, language or accent, ability, education, socioeconomic status)? What was the substance of the unfair assumption (e.g., intelligence, competence, integrity, honesty)? When have you been guilty of projecting a prejudice of your own—and what was the basis and substance of your assumption?
3. Consider anew the Great Commission as expressed in Matthew 28:18-20. How has your understanding of Christ's call in this Scripture been expanded or deepened through the study of this book? How do you now understand your call in relation to an increasingly multicultural world?

Actions Steps

- **Learn more** ... (1) Research the history of racism and prejudice in your own region. How have people who were deemed “outsiders” been treated by the majority, in terms of education, employment, housing, healthcare, and more? (2) Visit www.abhms.org to learn more about intercultural ministries of leadership, discipleship, and healing in your state and region.
- **Do more** ... (1) Organize a workshop or other educational event that explores cultural competency, diversity training, and multicultural awareness, using resources from your own congregation or the community at large. (2) Develop relationships, individually or congregationally, with another church or community group across cultural lines. This may mean going across the street, across town, or even across regional or state lines. Plan activities together that foster opportunities to serve together, work together, play together, and (as appropriate) worship together.

Week 7

Chapter 11 & Conclusion: Loving Others ... in a New Home

Scripture Meditation

Read **John 13:31-35**. In what concrete ways did Jesus show his love for the men and women who followed him? Reflect on how you might imitate his love-motivated behaviors in the lives of those God places in your life and ministry.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What new information or insights did you learn about diversity from these chapters? How did it confirm or contradict your previous assumptions? What surprised you and why? What did you *feel* in response to the information and why?
2. Review the categories of “Other” on pages 124–128. Which individuals or groups in twenty-first century society might be identified with the Nameless, the Lepers (unclean, untouchable), the Tax Collectors, the Samaritans? Why do we place them in such categories? How does the example of Jesus challenge us to transform how we relate to such people?
3. What baggage have you carried with you on this journey into Samaria? What pieces of that baggage do you feel empowered to unload and leave behind? What newfound gifts might you bring with you into the shared home where we are invited to dwell as the family of God?

Action Steps

- **Learn more** ... (1) Cultivate intentional self-awareness, and take time to identify the hurts, pain, and prejudices that have been weighing you down. Confess them—to God, to yourself, and as led by the Spirit, to someone you trust to deal compassionately with your transparency. (2) Having identified the “Others” in question 2 above, research one or more of those groups to gain more understanding of their context, their concerns, and their strengths.
- **Do more** ... (1) Develop programs of education and discipleship that use materials from cultures and perspectives other than your own (book studies, guest speakers, movies and music, etc.). (2) Talk with your pastor and worship leaders about creating opportunities to explore other cultural expressions of prayer, music, biblical interpretation, service learning, and more.