

Made in God's Image



**Discovering our place in the body of
Christ**

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Session 1 – Image

Starting point



When I was a teenager, my bedroom had a large mirror fixed to the wall. I hated the mirror because wherever I went in my room I could see my image reflected back at me. I begged my parents to remove the mirror but they refused for fear of damaging the wall. So, I devised a way of moving around the room without looking in the mirror!

My negative self-image impacted on how I thought of myself and how I related to others but it wasn't how God saw me. God doesn't hate me, he doesn't hate my body – he created me and God's creation is always good!

Many people with impairments (although not all) have poor self-image. This introductory session challenges us to think about how we see ourselves and to acknowledge that God accepts and lovingly created our bodies.

Genesis reminds us that God created people in his image. Therefore the body must be good since God is good. The passage also reminds us that God was pleased with his creation. Nothing that God creates is without purpose or unpleasant – it is always good.

This message is reinforced in Psalm 139 with the central message that we have been “knit” together in the womb. God has hand-woven us; lovingly stitched us together. Time and effort has been expended on us by God – we are “fearfully and wonderfully made.”

Each of us has been hand crafted by God. We come in all shapes and sizes but God made each one of us in his image. Therefore, God delights in us and God is pleased with his creation. God has created each of us as unique individuals and is positive about us.

Do we see ourselves as God sees us or do we view ourselves by the world's standards?

Session 1



Image

Opening Prayer

Loving Lord,
Be present with us in this place.
Open our minds to understand your word,
Touch our hearts through your Spirit
And lead us forward into wholeness.
We ask all this through your son,
Our Saviour, Jesus Christ, Amen.

Getting Started

Have enough apricots (or any object that has unique qualities) for everyone to take one. Each person identifies 'their' apricot, gets to know it, and then places it in front of them. The session leader picks them up, replaces them in the bowl and then asks participants to find 'their' apricot.

Allow the conversation about this to develop into a discussion about what is unique to each piece of fruit. Further the discussion about our individual uniqueness using the following questions:

- What is unique about me?
- What is unique about the person next to me?
- Is uniqueness a good or bad thing?

The Word

- Genesis 1:26-31
- Psalm 139:1-18

Bible Sense

Use the following questions to lead a discussion on the Bible passages.

- What do the Bible passages suggest about our image?
- What does it mean to be created in the 'image of God'?
- How does God feel about the creation?
- According to Psalm 139 is it a mistake when someone is born with a disability?
- What does it mean to be 'fearfully and wonderfully made'?
- What do the Bible passages suggest about God's view of disability and impairment?
- What do the Bible passages suggest about how God views his creation?

Life Sense

In this section, we reflect on body image in society and discuss the issues in light of the Bible passages.

- Does society give you a good or bad sense of body image? Why?
- How does society contribute to feelings of difference or uniqueness?
- How does knowing you are created in God's image affect how you feel about yourself? About your body?
- How does Psalm 139 make you feel about your body image?

Making Sense

Use Psalm 139 as a meditation to conclude the discussion. Play music which reflects the discussion such as *Who am I?* by Casting Crowns.

Invite the group to write a poem based on Psalm 139 as a personal reflection.

Closing Prayer

Loving Lord,

You have searched me and you know me,

I am created in your image.

You know all my thoughts and everywhere I will go,

I am created in your image.

You knit me together in my mother's womb,

I am created in your image.

I am fearfully and wonderfully made,

I am created in your image.

Your works are wonderful and I praise you because,

I am created in your image.

Amen.¹

¹ Resources from:

Equally different? © Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes 2008.

Hearts in Motion 2nd Edition © Through the Roof 2004.

Serendipity Bible © Serendipity House 1998.

Session 2 – Being Different Starting Point



Look around the average Church congregation and you will notice that compared to the membership of the Church there are very few people with impairments or disabilities. There are even fewer people with impairments in leadership or ministry roles within the Church.

Why is this? Where are people with disabilities? Why are people with impairments not encouraged to take roles of leadership within the Church?

These questions are made even more difficult to answer in light of the Bible readings in session 2.

Leviticus makes uncomfortable reading in an age of personal correctness. Was God unfairly discriminating against people with disabilities when he said they were unqualified to offer sacrifices? Just as God demanded that no imperfect animal be used for sacrifice, God asked that no priest with disability should offer sacrifices. At first glance this might seem like blatant discrimination and exclusion of disabled people.

However, a little later we discover that the priests with disabilities were permitted to take on other priestly roles within the temple such as eating the holy food – they were not excluded from their birth right.

In Mark a different kind of prejudice is displayed. The bleeding woman was unable to function in society, she was considered unclean and therefore was marginalised. This led to her utter desperation to touch the hem of Jesus' cloak. Once again though, we find a compassionate God who reaches out to the marginalised and those on the edge of society and heals.

In this session we think about what it means to be different, how the Bible deals with discrimination and whether prejudice continues in the Church today.

Session 2



Being different

Opening Prayer

Loving Lord,
Be present with us in this place.
Open our minds to understand your word,
Touch our hearts through your Spirit
And lead us forward into wholeness.
We ask all this through your son,
Our Saviour, Jesus Christ, Amen.

Getting Started

In this session we think about what it means to be different, how the Bible deals with discrimination and whether prejudice continues in the church today.

Show clips from the film *Forrest Gump* or watch the film together (if time permits). Following the film lead a discussion on the issues raised using the suggested questions.

- What were the issues that made Forrest 'different'?
- Who discriminated against Forrest? Why?
- How did he overcome these difficulties?
- How does this make you feel?

The Word

- Leviticus 21:16-23
- Mark 5:24-34

Bible Sense

Use the following questions to lead a discussion on the Bible passages.

- From the Bible passages what are some of the issues that people with impairments faced?
- In Leviticus, which impairments exclude the priest from participating in worship?
- Why were priests with disabilities discriminated against in the temple?
- Why is it important that the priest is without defect? Does it matter to God?
- What were the issues for the woman in Mark?
- What would you consider to be the worst of this woman's problems?
- Why was it scandalous that she touched Jesus' clothes?
- Why was it important for Jesus to know who touched him?
- Why was the woman so afraid?

Life Sense

- Do people with impairments still face discrimination in church today? If so, in what ways?
- Have you ever been excluded from Church life in similar ways to the people in the Bible passages? If so, how did it make you feel?
- How does our church building hinder people from worshipping God?

Making Sense

In this session we have focussed on some of the negative Bible passages surrounding disability and impairment. However, this is only part of the story. In the following sessions we will discover more of the positive readings of the Bible surrounding impairment. So don't despair – there is hope!

Do a survey of the church building together to determine the problems that a person with disabilities might face in church. Think of some practical steps that could be taken to eliminate such problems.

Closing Prayer

Inclusive Lord,

Forgive us when we have excluded people because they are different,

We humbly reach out to you.

Heal the pain we have felt when we have been excluded for being different,

We humbly reach out to you.

By your Spirit empower us as followers of Christ to include all people who are different,

We humbly reach out to you.

In the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **Amen.**²

² Resources from:

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Session 3 – Disabled Christ Starting Point



I have a visible disability but sometimes have to remind people that I'm not as weak as I look! Although my body might look frail it is relatively strong and robust.

Similar could be said for the lamb in Revelation 5:6. The lamb looked as though it had been slaughtered; it was weak and vulnerable. But this lamb was the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world – Jesus Christ. As a human Jesus was as weak and helpless as anyone else, but as God he was able to conquer sin and death.

However, having fought death and won we might expect all traces of Jesus' injuries on the cross to be completely healed in his resurrection. On the contrary, John 20:27 tells us that Jesus still bore the marks of the cross in his resurrected body.

This tells us something about strength and weakness. If Jesus' resurrected body had been healed from injury, disability and death, the marks he bore could not be a sign of weakness but of strength. Jesus became disabled on the cross and therefore truly identifies with disabled people. He relates to those bearing the marks of injury or illness. Jesus turns the notion of illness being a sign of weakness on its head.

Therefore, we too are challenged to see injury, illness or disability – not as a sign of weakness – but as an opportunity for strength.

In this session we discover that Christ became disabled on the cross, that he retained the marks of the cross in his resurrected body and these marks are a symbol of strength in weakness.

Session 3



Disabled Christ

Opening Prayer

Loving Lord,
Be present with us in this place.
Open our minds to understand your word,
Touch our hearts through your Spirit
And lead us forward into wholeness.
We ask all this through your son,
Our Saviour, Jesus Christ, Amen.

Getting Started

Show a picture of the sculpture, *The Stand In*, (or some other image of Christ on the cross) or borrow the sculpture for the study (this may be particularly useful if people with visual impairments are present). In pairs or groups discuss the meaning of the sculpture, feedback to the group any conclusions and feelings.

Watch clips from *The Passion of the Christ* or a similar film. Discuss the significance of Christ becoming disabled on the cross.

- In which ways did Christ become disabled on the cross?
- How do you feel as you watch the suffering that Christ went through?
- How do you relate to Christ through this?

The Word

- John 20:24-29
- Revelation 5:1-6

Bible Sense

We often focus on Thomas but...

- Why did Jesus ask Thomas to put his hands on his wounds?
- What is significant about the wounds themselves?
- What does this tell us about God's view of disability?

- In Revelation, how is the lamb described? Who is the lamb?
- What is significant about the lamb?
- What does this reveal about God's kingdom?
- What does Christ's impairment tell us about God's view of disability?

Life Sense

In 2 Corinthians 12:10 Paul writes, "I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

- In light of the passages, is the disabled person weak or strong?
- Does understanding Christ as impaired change your understanding of disability?
- Can you think of any examples of strength in weakness within the world today?
- Do you feel able to delight in weakness? How are you strong in weakness?

Making Sense

Seeds are a symbol of weakness and vulnerability as well as strength and potential.

Give a seed to each person and provide a large tub in which to plant the seeds. Play some appropriate music and ask each person to hold the seed in their hand concentrating on both its strength and weakness. Invite the members to plant the seeds as a sign of their weakness and a symbol of their strength in Christ.

Closing Prayer

Loving Lord,

Forgive us Lord when we consider physical strength to be the most important for,

When I am weak then I am strong.

Thank you Lord that you suffered on the cross to identify with our pain for,

When I am weak then I am strong.

Help us Lord to see weakness as strength and not as a symbol of powerlessness for,

When I am weak then I am strong.

Use our weaknesses to further your kingdom we pray, in Jesus name, **Amen.**³

³ Resources from:

Multi-sensory Prayer, Sue Wallace, Scripture Union, 2005
Serendipity Bible © Serendipity House 1998.

Session 4

What is healing?

Starting Point



My twisted spine is very prominent and evident for all to see. Over the years I have often been asked if I would like healing for my condition. I usually answer that I have already been healed. This often stuns people as it is clear on meeting me that I still have a back condition! However, I firmly believe I have been healed by God. My spine is still curved but I have experienced change in my life.

God has given me self-confidence and an ability to embrace my condition as God embraces it. Compared to my former self there is no doubt that I have been healed.

There is no one size fits all when it comes to healing. Jesus used a number of techniques from spitting on people to rubbing mud in their eyes! Mark 2:9 suggests that there is a relationship between sin in a person's life and healing, whilst in Luke 8:48 Jesus says that it is the woman's faith which has made her well.

Sin and faith are often related to healing but is this always true for every illness or impairment? In John 9:3 a third possibility is raised by Jesus. When meeting a blind man for the first time, Jesus stated that it was neither sin nor a lack of faith which was responsible for the man's impairment. Rather, the man was blind so that God's glory could be revealed in his life and through his ultimate healing.

The variety of ways in which Jesus healed suggests that sin and faith are factors in people's healing but not the only factors. Therefore we need to exercise caution and listen for the Holy Spirit's prompting when praying for healing.

In this session we think about what healing means and the different methods Jesus uses in the Bible. We consider some of the implications and share our experiences of healing.

Session 4



Healing: Part 1 What is healing?

Opening Prayer

Loving Lord,
Be present with us in this place.
Open our minds to understand your word,
Touch our hearts through your Spirit
And lead us forward into wholeness.
We ask all this through your son,
Our Saviour, Jesus Christ, Amen.

Getting Started

On a flip chart or in small groups ask people to compile a list of words that describe healing and what it means for them. Feedback and lead a discussion using the following questions:

- Have you ever witnessed someone being healed? What happened?
- Would you like to be healed? Why?
- Why might someone not want to be healed?

The Word

- Mark 2:3-12
- Luke 8:43-48
- John 9:1-7

Bible Sense

Divide the members into three groups and ask them to read a passage each. In each group discuss the possible conditions Jesus attaches to healing and the issues raised from the passage. Here are some sample questions each group may like to consider in the discussion:

- Does Jesus place conditions on the healing? If so, what are they?
- Is there a link between sin and healing?
- Is there a link between faith and healing?
- What do these passages tell us about healing?

Each group shares their Bible reading with the rest of the group and reports back their reflections.

Read together James 5:14-16

- Why is oil used in healing? What is its purpose?
- How is confession and prayer a part of the healing process?
- What should someone do if they are unwell?
- What will happen when a fellow Christian prays for healing?

Life Sense

- What is the connection between the physical and spiritual areas of our life?
- What is the benefit of having members of the church pray for us?
- What is holding you back from receiving prayer for healing?

Making Sense

Play some quiet music and have a time of prayer including confession. During this time encourage each group member to receive healing and anointing with oil.

Closing Prayer

Jesus asks us, "Do you want to be made well?"

Lord, we ask for your healing in our lives.

When we are afraid,

Lord, we ask for your healing in our lives.

When we cannot see a way forward,

Lord, we ask for your healing in our lives.

When we are in pain,

Lord, we ask for your healing in our lives.

We confess now anything that might hold us back from receiving God's healing.

Silence

Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven."

Lord we ask for your healing in our lives. Amen.

Session 5

When healing doesn't happen

Starting Point



Have you ever prayed for God to heal someone and the result is they got sicker? Most of us have had this experience at some time or other. We pray, believing that God will heal the person and instead they experience increasing disability, illness or in some cases even death. This hardly seems fair. Surely, a loving, compassionate God doesn't want his people to suffer needlessly? But there is another way of looking at suffering, disability and illness.

We often assume that Jesus healed every sick person he encountered. But at the pool of Bethesda Jesus was surrounded by people needing help but chose to heal only one (John 5:2-9). Why did he leave the others to suffer?

As we discovered in the previous session, God can and does heal today. Healing brings God glory, increases our faith and forces us to address our sin. However, God also chooses not to heal and this also brings God glory.

The apostle Paul found himself in that latter category. It is thought by some that Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' was some form of physical impairment. Despite repeatedly asking for healing God did not answer Paul's request. Instead, God gave Paul a message of hope amidst his impairment, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Although God dislikes suffering, God uses the pain of this world to reveal his glory and power. God's power and grace are most clearly demonstrated against the backdrop of suffering. God can create something beautiful out of impairment and this is why he allows it in our lives.

In this session we reflect on the reasons why some people are healed and others are not. We consider how to live our lives with the hope of healing and the reality of physical impairment.

Session 5



Healing: Part 2

When it doesn't happen...

Opening Prayer

Loving Lord,
Be present with us in this place.
Open our minds to understand your word,
Touch our hearts through your Spirit
And lead us forward into wholeness.
We ask all this through your son,
Our Saviour, Jesus Christ, Amen.

Getting Started

In this session we think about the reasons why some people are healed and others are not. We consider how to live our lives with the hope of healing and the reality of physical impairment.

As a group review the list made in the previous session. Lead a discussion to further the conversation using the following questions:

- Does God always heal people?
- Is healing always physical?
- Does God heal in the ways we expect him to?
- Why do you think some people are healed and others are not?

Hand out large thorns, (rose bush thorns are ideal or alternatively you could use nails) ask people to press them gently into the palms of their hands.

- What do you think a 'thorn in the flesh' might be?

The Word

- 2 Corinthians 12:7-10
- John 5:2-9

Bible Sense

- What do you think Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' might be?
- How has Paul's thorn affected his life?
- What was God's answer to Paul's prayer for healing?
- How do you feel about God's promise in verse 9?
- What does verse 9 tell us about how God sees impairment?⁴

Put yourself in the place of the man at the pool of Bethesda...

- Who or what do you see around you?
- What was the pool at Bethesda believed to do?
- How many people does the Bible say were at the pool?
- Why do you think Jesus didn't heal all of the people at the pool?

Life Sense

- How has God worked in and through you in times of weakness?
- Why do you think God simply doesn't take the pain away?
- Why do you think God doesn't always heal?
- How should we react if healing doesn't occur in our lives?

Making Sense

Either watch the whole of or clips from Joni Eareckson Tada's film of her life. Again offer an opportunity for prayers of healing and anointing with oil.

Closing Prayer

Loving Lord,

When healing doesn't occur in our lives, we acknowledge:

⁴ Resources in this session from:
Serendipity Bible © Serendipity House 1998.

Your power is made perfect in our weakness.

When we don't understand why you have allowed us to suffer, we acknowledge:

Your power is made perfect in our weakness.

When we struggle on a daily basis, we acknowledge:

Your power is made perfect in our weakness.

Give us strength and grace to endure our weakness

So that your power might be more visible in our lives. **Amen.**

Further Reading:

Joni, *Joni Eareckson Tada*, Zondervan Publishing house.

A Place of Healing, *Joni Eareckson Tada*, David C Cook UK.

Session 6

The Body

Starting Point



Have you ever wondered about the purpose of your finger or toe nails? They really don't seem to have much use, do they? Our nails sit there at the ends of our fingers and toes, growing continually, demanding our care. Occasionally we file our nails and make them look attractive by painting them, but what do they really do? How do they contribute to the body's function?

We use our fingers constantly. To write, cook, clean, etc. Our fingers and toes go into all sorts of places and sometimes into dangerous situations and our nails protect our fingers from injury. If you have ever dropped something on your foot, or hammered your finger when hanging a picture, you will know that the nail is important! Our nails may not be as important as our heart or our lungs but they have their purpose and without them the body would function less adequately.

The analogy of the body of Christ, used in 1 Corinthians 12 is particularly poignant for people whose bodies don't function in the usual way. What does Paul mean when he says that the weaker members of the body are indispensable? Who are the weaker members of the body of Christ?

People with impairments (whether learning or physical) are often neglected in the Church. They are often not given the opportunities to exercise their God given gifts or encouraged to express their faith in light of their disabilities.

1 Corinthians 12 clearly demonstrates that all Christians have their place and role in the body of Christ. God has given people of all abilities gifts and graces for use in the body and without them the Christian church cannot function effectively.

In this session we reflect on our place in the body of Christ and discuss how people with disabilities can best exercise their gifts in the Church. This session draws us back to the first session where we reflected on Psalm 139 and challenges us to connect this to the passage in 1 Corinthians.

Session 6



The Body

Opening Prayer

Loving Lord,
Be present with us in this place.
Open our minds to understand your word,
Touch our hearts through your Spirit
And lead us forward into wholeness.
We ask all this through your son,
Our Saviour, Jesus Christ, Amen.

Getting Started

We conclude the study series by considering how the body of Christ should function. The study raises a challenge to the church about how it can be a more inclusive place and asks where people with disabilities fit into the body.

Give everyone a jigsaw piece (a floor jigsaw of the human body is ideal but any easy to assemble jigsaw will make the point). Ask the group to work together to complete the jigsaw. Lead a discussion about the human body using the following questions:

- Can the human body function if it loses one of its organs? If so, how?
- Have you ever donated an organ? If you have anyone in the group with a donated organ or has experience of this ask them to tell their story.
- What does the human body and its intricate design tell us about God?
- Why is the human body a good analogy for the church?

The Word

- 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Bible Sense

- How do you interpret this passage from your personal perspective?
- Which verses stand out for you?
- Why is v. 12 a good illustration of v. 13?
- Do you think the church overlooks people who are perceived to be weaker?
- How are we part of Christ's body?
- What do you think Paul means in v. 21?
- What are the weaker parts of our body that seem indispensable (physical and spiritual)?
- In v.26 Paul suggests we should suffer if a part of the body suffers. How do we live this out in practice?
- What does this passage tell us about how God sees disability?

Life Sense

- How connected are you to your Church body?
- What could you do to help "the body" function better?
- How do these verses make you feel about your place in the body of Christ?
- In our first session we discovered in Psalm 139 that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made", how does the Psalm connect with 1 Corinthians 12?

Making Sense

To end the course hold an informal act of communion, focussing particularly on the impaired Christ and our inclusion in his suffering. Affirm the gifts in each member of the group and reminding them that they are "fearfully and wonderfully made" by God.

Closing Prayer

Loving God,

Forgive us for the times we have excluded people from your body,

Because they are different from us.

Remind us that we cannot function independently but need each other.

May we, as people who appear weaker, be a challenge to the Church

And be an example of the body of Christ.

Help us to recognise the gifts and potential of all people

Regardless of their ability.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

Amen.⁵

⁵ Resources in this session from:
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