

Preparing Yourself for Leadership



■ Encountering God

The trip you are preparing to lead is not just a journey to a “place away.” It is a spiritual journey, a journey into the heart of God. Like you, the participants on the trip will make an outer journey and an inner journey. You will be able to see a lot of their outer journey as you lead them in the trip experiences. You will be able to see only what each chooses to share of the spiritual journey that accompanies the traveling, the meeting, the doing, the being along the way. In this manual we hope to assist you in your own openness to the spiritual journey as you lead the outer journey, and in your nurturing, affirming, evoking, and encouraging the spiritual journey of the participants.

■ God in the Burning Bush

Read Exodus 3:1–5.



Think for a moment about Moses. He was out with his sheep, minding his own business—or rather his father-in-law’s business—

when in the midst of the desert, a bush began to burn. In that experience, he met God. He came face to face with Sacred Mystery. He had stumbled into one of the “thin places” where the holy and human mix and mingle more readily. But did he stumble into it? Was it without intention or awareness that he encountered God in that material entity of a burning bush? We do not know for sure. However, what is clear is that there are times and places where we are more likely to find ourselves face to face with God and where God may more easily find us. When God finds us, when we are

willing to stick around and meet God, have a conversation, listen, hear, and respond, then God also may call us to act.

You, as a leader, and each of the participants will come together with an array of reasons for being on the trip. Some participants may indeed travel with the intention of meeting God. Other may travel for reasons, perhaps unknown, which will put you and them in a place where God will speak to you, ready or not, whether you intend it or not. Either way, in the conversation, there will be opportunity to reflect on your own life experience in the past as well as the experience of the immediate present. Out of that reflection, there may come a clear call to action. Perhaps it will be a nudge in some direction that is not so clear but which, if attended to during and after the trip, may emerge into a new understanding of self, or work, or vocation, or purpose in life.

■ Christ Met on the Road

Read Luke 24:13–35.



Think about the disciples on their post-crucifixion walk to Emmaus. They had not heard about the resurrection yet, but, in an unexpected encounter, Jesus appeared to them. In dialogue with this person they thought to be a stranger, they encountered the living Christ. At the table, his identity was revealed to them. It was in the midst of community sharing that Jesus was made real to them.

The importance of reading Scripture and dialoguing with it during the trip, and the importance of occasions for community sharing, especially at mealtimes, is unmistakable in this passage. A trip leader may learn two things from this passage. First, never dismiss as unimportant someone who is speaking to you, for indeed, she or he may be carrying a word of wisdom, a message of the moment that may lead to the mission of tomorrow. Second, it is important, not only to set aside formal times for reflection, pondering, and sharing, but also to stay alert to the possibilities that informal gathering times may hold. Martin Buber once said: “One eats in holiness and the table becomes an altar.” Eating together creates a sacred space where meanings may emerge, where the bread and cup shared may again reveal the Christ among us.

The Moses story indicates that we must always anticipate the presence of God. God is present all around, and in and through creation, and may speak to us at any moment. Seemingly temporal and material places may break open to reveal the eternal. The ordinary may speak to us of the sacred. The Emmaus story reminds us that even in the midst of an experience of death or destruction, resurrection and creativity may happen. New understanding and wisdom may emerge from shared experience and community conversation.

As you read these Scripture passages, what other learnings do they hold for you as you prepare to lead a trip? Is there a way to share your learnings with participants and to invite them to reflect on these passages also?

■ Yourself as Leader

Being a trip leader requires a triple attentiveness, giving your attentiveness to these things:

- the content of the overall experience
- the dynamics, experiences, and needs of the community with whom you travel
- your own sense of self in the role of leader

You must also be attentive to yourself, understanding how you act and react as a leader.

■ Your Leadership Style

It may be helpful as part of your preparation to spend some time thinking about who you are as a leader. What has your leadership been like in the past? Are there things you would like to change about how you lead people? You may want to write in your own journal some reflections on your personal leadership style. List what you consider to be your strengths and your weaknesses. Identify ways in which you may ask for help in the weak areas in order to “round out” your leadership.

■ Your Fears and Concerns

Spend some time assessing whether you have any fears associated with the trip or with leading the trip. If you have some concerns about personal safety or health, for example, they may be magnified when you add the leadership component. Letting your fears out in the open, and naming them, is like turning on the light in a dark room. You are less likely to trip over the things that are scattered over the floor when the room is lit than when the room is dark and you don’t know where the dangerous places are. Some leaders get anxious before a trip because they anticipate problems, but haven’t acknowledged what those problems might be. Do a self-check, and be honest with yourself. If you anticipate problems during the trip—for instance with travel arrangements or other logistics, with persons you are to meet on the trip, or with participants in the group—admit it. When you identify concerns, you have the opportunity to figure out how to deal with them and to consider alternatives before you leave home.

■ Your Anticipation of Joys

You may also want to anticipate the joys of the experience you are about to have. If you are looking forward to visiting a particular place or to meeting a special person, you may want to handle things during the trip in ways that will help you to enjoy the opportunity when it comes. While

you are the leader of the trip, you are also a participant in the experience. It is quite legitimate to pursue your own joys along with leading the group.

■ Your Own Boundaries

It will be necessary for you to set some boundaries for yourself and the group in order to offer good leadership. If you know that you are best in the morning, let the group know that staying up late to talk over the day in an informal conversation after the evening's debriefing is not the best thing for you. If during a "free" afternoon, you need to have some personal space while the group goes in its various directions, you may want to decline an invitation from a group member to join her or him. On the other hand, some group members may hesitate to invite you because you are the leader. So, if you are someone who enjoys and wants company, you might see if you can accompany two or three of the group who are doing something of interest to you.



■ A Look at Leadership in the Bible

As preparation for the trip, you may want to read about some of God's leaders and the issues they encountered in leading a group.

■ Immersion in the "Foreign"

Read Exodus 32:1–20.



What were the people thinking? How could they make a golden calf out of their own jewelry and claim it was the god that led them out of Egypt? And Aaron! What in the world got into him so that he went along with it?

Often when people are in a new place, with new people, in a "foreign" or unfamiliar land, they may "revert" to behaviors that seem adolescent or even childish. Ordinarily mature people can become "disoriented" in a new situation, especially if they do not speak the language, or if it is their first such experience. They may do or say things they would not think of doing or saying at home. Likewise, in a new place, a person may suddenly give voice to latent prejudices, use inappropriate language, or act in hurtful ways, without even being aware of it. She or he may stand out in bas-relief against the different culture your group is visiting, causing embarrassment. This offers you an opportunity for gentle reflection with the individual, as well as for redirection and renewal.

If you have established trust among the group and with individuals in it, and if the group has acknowledged that part of the intent of the trip is for spiritual growth as well as accumulation of knowledge, or service, you may have the opening to assist individuals in looking at their behavior and the issues related to it. A community context may also support this kind of growth. The behavior of one person may even elicit in others the recognition that within themselves they need a re-vision, a new seeing, in their lives. A caution here: While it is important to be prepared for the possibility of helping a person reflect on his or her behavior, it is also important to carefully assess whether it is necessary, or possible, to deal with it, either individually or within the group.

■ Mutterings and Murmurings

Read Numbers 11:1–17.



In this story, Moses overheard the people complaining about the usual stuff: accommodations, foods, schedule, etc. He began to doubt his own leadership abilities and went to God complaining about how he got into this mess. Yes, the people may complain. After several days of cold and rain, or after five nights in a row of the same or similar food, or after a couple of lodging places with no hot water or with lumpy beds, the people may mutter and mumble. You may wonder how you got

yourself into this. Like Moses, you may want to ask for some help.

Usually, you will not be the only leader on the trip. If there is another leader, it may help for the two of you to mutter and mumble together as well. After all, just because you are a leader does not mean you don't feel the lumps in the bed, that you don't taste too much salt in the food or shiver in the damp weather.

You may also want to ask a couple of the participants to "brainstorm" with you about what might be done. Maybe nothing. But if that is the case, at least others will have had the opportunity to discover that reality and to "pass it along" in a positive kind of gossip to the rest of the group. If something can be done—skipping a stop in order to get a good night's rest, changing the menu for the next night, or just naming the gripes in such a way that people can laugh together about it—then you may be able to get assistance from two or three folks to help make that happen and to interpret it to the rest of the participants.

■ Leadership Problems

Read Mark 2:1–12; 3:1–6; 4:1–13.



In each of these stories you will find Jesus having leadership problems. The people, including his own disciples, didn't "get it."

Reading through the Gospels, you will find many passages in which the disciples revealed that they did not quite understand this man whom they followed. At times, participants on a trip may not "get it." They may not "get" the purpose of the work they are doing. Someone on a mission work project may ask, "Why build a church, when people do not have a place to live?" But the church is what the village has asked to have built. For such occasions it is important to be familiar with the General Assembly's recent statement on our partnership in mission. It is Handout 4 in Resources for Orientation and Preparation, page 101.

When people don't get the point of the trip you may feel exasperation. Jesus certainly experienced his share of exasperation with his followers. He probably was exasperated with James and John fighting over their places in heaven (Matthew 20:20–28). And he must have been exasperated with Judas in his Zealot concern for the poor when the woman poured expensive oil over Jesus' feet (Matthew 26:6–13). Undoubtedly you will have some exasperating times along the journey you make.

It may be helpful to remember that Jesus often went "off to a lonely place," and we can perhaps conjecture that this was to pray through the exasperations of his leadership and ministry. Taking a deep breath (and remembering the Breath/Spirit of God as you do) is a mini-retreat, an opportunity to collect yourself before you respond. Sometimes it may require more than that, a brief walk to the edge of the group, a moment of calling forth the love of God which resides in you to meet this particular moment of challenge. Sometimes, if the exasperation and its cause are persistent, it may require morning or evening prayer time in your "closet," in your own space, before meeting with, or after leaving, the group. It may even be helpful to have a brief chant or mantra which you use "under your breath" when dealing with sometimes difficult fellow travelers. One that may work well is "Changeless and calm, Deep Mystery, ever more deeply rooted in Thee."²

■ Conflict and Resolution

Read 1 Corinthians 13.



This passage is often taken out of context, used at weddings and all sorts of occasions for talking about love. What we often forget is that Paul's words are addressed to a church

2. Words adapted from Elizabeth of the Trinity by Gerald May of the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation.

in deep conflict. They are fighting over whose gifts of the Spirit are better. They are ranting and raving over the hierarchy of good things. Where two or three are gathered together, there is a good possibility for conflict. And when there is conflict it is necessary to deal with it in a loving and creative manner. Be familiar with "Seeking to Be Faithful Together: Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement." This is Handout 3 in Resources for Orientation and Preparation, page 100. It will undoubtedly come in handy. You may also want to read the section on conflict resolution in *When God's People Travel Together: A Trip Leader's Planning Manual*. Of course, it will be helpful to have your own "love quotient" well intact!

■ Love the Questions

Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign tongue. . . . [L]ive the questions.³

This book, as well as other two books in this series, *When God's People Travel Together*, seeks to assist leaders in their ministry on mission trips but cannot cover all the possibilities you may encounter. These materials provide some guidance for stirring thoughts, perhaps evoking questions in your mind, heart, and spirit. Rainer Maria

Rilke's words suggest that questions themselves have value. It is in closing down the questions of life that we become hardened or, in Jesus' phrase, "hard-hearted" (see, for example, Matthew 19:8). It is in not asking questions that our souls shrink, our sense of the world narrows, and we become flat. Questions open us up. Questions have the spiritual value of leading us further into the world, into persons, into ourselves.



As questions arise for you *before* the trip,

- write them down,
- encourage participants to write their own questions,
- seek answers and responses from those assisting you in planning and implementing the trip,
- know that for some questions there may not be firm answers.

As questions arise *during* the trip, your own and those from the group,

- ask them when appropriate,

3. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Joan M. Burnham (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2000), p. 35.

- ask the people you are meeting,
- raise questions within the group you are leading.

There does not need to be an answer for every question. Allow questions to become your teachers. Remember the spiritual discipline of Mary as she “pondered these things in her heart.”

Even *after* the trip, questions may continue to rise in the quiet moments of your day or, more impudently, in the rush of the business of your life.

- Allow space for the questions.
- Encourage participants to continue to raise questions, to ponder them, to pursue them, to let them wriggle around in the mind, to struggle with them in the heart.

There is a story (perhaps apocryphal, perhaps not, but certainly filled with some truth) about a former Senator who rode a bicycle around Washington, DC, looking very much as if he were doing nothing. When asked about this practice, he said, “I am thinking. I am conjuring up impudent questions.” It was a noble calling!

At the end of each of the following chapters, there will be a list of questions. They will be generic in nature, related to the general experience of mission trips. You, as leader, are invited to tailor the questions to your own trip’s purpose and experience and to add more questions to the list. These questions may

- serve as part of a formal reflection time,
- be inserted into informal conversations,
- be asked aloud as part of an encounter with a guide or host, a guest, or another person you meet.

■ Encourage the Questions

You may also want to encourage the participants to come up with a question per day out of their experience. This could be done each evening in a “go-round,” an opportunity for the group, sitting in a circle, to go around once, giving everyone a brief option to speak her or his question. There is no need to “give answers,” though the group may want to explore some of the questions further after the go-round. It is part of the richness of a group experience that one person may hear what another has missed, or see from a perspective something not available to another. Then a question may be answered easily. Other questions may need to be pondered long-term.

