

Lenten Study:

“Questioning Our Grip on the Cross”



Leader’s Guide

Lenten Study: Questioning Our Grip on the Cross

There are aspects to this particular study that are a little different, and therefore worth commenting upon.

TWO COMPLEMENTARY WAYS OF ENGAGING WITH THE STUDY SERIES: Study documents and YouTube videos

Study participants have two ways in which they can engage with the study materials. Firstly, there are the printed studies, which are also available as downloadable PDF documents that can be viewed on your computer, tablet or smartphone. Secondly, there are YouTube videos for each of the seven studies.

The links to the downloadable PDF files and to the YouTube videos can be found at:

<http://blackwooduc.org.au/downloads/studies/lentenstudy2022>

It is hoped that these two different study media will complement each other.

How each group approaches the study is, of course, up to them. I would anticipate, however, that it may be helpful for a study group to consider doing the following:-

1. PRE-READING

It may be helpful for each participant to review the particular week's study notes (printed or PDF) prior to the group session. The benefit this offers is "priming the mental pump" for what follows in the group session. If one makes a practice of this, then the group session that follows may be of more benefit, because one is not coming to the study "cold"; when one begins to engage with the material in the group, one already has a "mental placeholder" for the material being considered, with questions already forming in one's mind.

But, of course, we do not live in an ideal world! Sometimes, it may be that circumstances have not permitted a prior review of the notes before the group session, and that is, of course, totally fine.

2. WATCHING THE VIDEO AS A GROUP

A good way to start the group session may be to simply watch the YouTube video for that particular week. The videos will, in most cases, not be longer than about 30 minutes. In some cases, the video may suggest a brief intermission half-way through. One benefit of the video format is that if someone happens to need a break for some reason, it is easy to pause, then later restart the video. As participants watch the video, they may also find it helpful to make notes for later reference in the discussion.

Please note that Michael can, on request, supply the weekly video in either DVD or USB format if that is helpful. He is also prepared to assist with the set-up of the video, especially if you are holding your group at the church.

3. POST-VIDEO COOL-DOWN!

After the video has completed, it may be helpful to have a stretch, and maybe even a brief period of "mental decompression," where one just walks or sits in silence for a few minutes.

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4. **GROUP DISCUSSION**

The group discussion that follows is the key part of the study, namely engaging with the material as a group. As a Group Leader, depending on the group and the group's level of engagement with the study, you may or may not find the "Reflection Questions" at the end of the study a helpful starting place. It could be that your group engages readily with the material, moving easily over the ground covered, in a natural and spontaneous way. If that's the case, it would seem silly to artificially interject unnecessary questions, just because they are in the guide. It could be, though, that the group struggles to engage spontaneously with the material, and therefore might benefit from the direction provided by the reflection questions.

Please consider the reflection questions as *suggestive*, rather than prescriptive. Some of the questions I have raised may be questions that also come to *your* mind. Some questions may not have occurred to you, and you may deem them worthy of exploration. Other questions may have no interest or relevance to you at all. To the extent that the questions are helpful in facilitating discussion in your group, or sparking your own thoughts, use them. Otherwise consider them of no account.

5. **(OPTIONAL) POST-GROUP FOLLOW-UP**

It may be that, on occasion, one or more participants may wish to explore an aspect of the study in more depth than time permits in the group format. If that is the case, Michael is very open to being contacted and engaging either in an email exchange or catching up for a coffee to discuss. Michael would like to emphasize that he is *not* going to be "precious" about this study, but instead encourages honest feedback and critique; do *not* be afraid of hurting his feelings!

GENERAL COMMENTS ON LEADING A STUDY GROUP

For a number of you, who have led such groups for many years, this advice is in the category of "teaching grandma how to suck eggs"! I therefore apologise, in advance, for highlighting points that you have been putting into practice for years.

- **HELPING TO CREATE AN ATMOSPHERE OF "SAFETY" IN THE GROUP**
The Uniting Church is committed to "safe church" principles which function to ensure each individual's physical, psychological, emotion and spiritual safety. Part of this commitment to safety is that we emphasize that people should feel safe in sharing their opinions: that they will not be attacked for sharing their thoughts and beliefs. Sometimes we will encounter someone in a group with very different beliefs to ourselves. At such times, we may find ourselves internally "reacting" to something that is said, and which we disagree with. Being able to engage respectfully with people of differing viewpoints can be helped by a commitment to truly *listening*, pushing to one side any perceived need to change the mind of the other person.
- **ENSURING THAT EACH PERSON HAS THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE**
The Group Leader should neither dominate the discussion, nor allow another person to dominate the discussion. If you find that someone is monopolising the discussion to the detriment of others being heard, then you may find it helpful to gently move the conversation along. This can normally be done quite effectively by saying something to the effect, "We haven't heard from Mary on this one, and I'd really be

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interested to hear what she has to say.”

- **BEING SENSITIVE TO PEOPLE BEING CUT OFF OR NOT FULLY HEARD**

Sometimes a participant can be sharing a thought and the moment they finish their sentence, another group member speaks, moving the conversation in an entirely different direction. It may be necessary to come back to the first person, as soon as possible, to ensure that they had indeed finished sharing their thoughts.

- **KEEPING THE DISCUSSION FLOWING**

A great way to start a group discussion (especially after watching a video such as with this Lenten study), is to simply go around the circle and ask people for a brief “first impression” or “what struck you?” about the material. Such an approach might be so successful that the group simply keeps going in this way, as participants share thoughts and raise questions which, in turn, sparks further thoughts from other participants.

There are some groups who will engage with a particular topic in a way that is natural and spontaneous; it just flows. If, however, you feel the group is getting bogged down on something, it may be helpful to suggest that topic be left for a time and that the group move on to consider other aspects.

The “Reflection Questions” at the rear of each study may be a helpful “fall-back” position if you find the discussion drying up.

- **DON'T BE AFRAID TO SHARE YOUR OWN THOUGHTS**

As Group Leader, you will, undoubtedly, have your own thoughts and responses to the study in question. Whilst it is essential that you give space for others to share, it can be helpful, in order to encourage sharing, for you to offer thoughts and questions of your own. Your thoughts, your questions, may actually offer a gateway to someone else's involvement.

- **WHAT MIGHT A “GOOD” GROUP SESSION FEEL LIKE AT THE END?**

A good group session might include these sort of things:-

Where everyone feels as if they've had an opportunity to contribute their thoughts.

Where everyone feels as if they've been heard and not judged.

Where everyone has found at least something thought-provoking.

I will be happy to attend your group as a guest, at your request.

Good luck with your group and I hope that all of you appreciate this study series *Questioning Our Grip on the Cross*.

Michael Dowling
Minister
Blackwood Uniting Church