

Study Guide for Churches

YOU ARE
CHANGING
THE WORLD

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Whether You Like it or Not

David LaMotte

Introduction

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Many years ago, I wrote a song that has these words as its chorus: “There’s no time like the present, and there’s no present like time.” I still believe those words, and I want to thank you not only for taking the time to read a book I wrote, but for wanting to go deeper and engage in some conversation about how the ideas in it relate to your theology and the living out of your faith. I think the world needs you, and I appreciate you showing up for this conversation, and for whatever might grow from it.

When I first began writing *You Are Changing the World Whether You Like It or Not*, I had a bit of a quandary to work through. I wanted the book to be accessible and relatable to individuals and groups in various contexts, including public high schools and universities, but I kept bumping up against my own faith. I believe the ideas expressed here stand on their own in a secular context, but for me, they are heavily informed by my own beliefs and spiritual experience. I don’t see a clear line that separates the sacred and secular, and it felt a bit strange leaving that part of the conversation out. What to do? Should I write it as a religious book and include the theological context for the conversation? Or should I leave that part out so that it could be accessible to people who might be, understandably, shut down by religious language?

In the end, I decided to write a secular book, so that it could be used in many settings, but to also write an accompanying study guide that engages with the theology that underpins these ideas and practices for those who choose to explore that.

My own evolving faith deeply informs the ideas in the book. But it also goes the other way—the frameworks presented in the book have significant implications for how I understand the life, death, resurrection, teachings of Jesus, and what it means to take them seriously. Though I have often shared those ideas at conferences and retreats, this is the first time I have tried to write them down in one place.

After I committed to the plan of a separate study guide, my father worked with me to form the idea further. I’m honored and thrilled to have worked with him on the first draft, as he is my favorite theologian. We then invited Rev. Marc Van Bulck to work on it as well, and I am so grateful for his co-authorship, including drafting most of the discussion questions. Finally, Amy Kim Kyremes-Parks helped us get it to the gate, with wise suggestions and revisions, and Jill Tolbert gave wonderful first draft feedback. Big thanks to Chalice Press for providing the vehicle for people to encounter this book and study guide. It is an honor and privilege to work with them.

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How To Use This Guide

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This book is divided into six sections since church calendars tend to lend themselves to six-part events. Fortunately, the book falls naturally into six sections. Book clubs and individual readers have also been working through the book, and you may have other ideas about how and where to use it. Go for it, with my blessing. We initially wrote it together in the third person (“On page 73, David discusses...”), but that felt a bit ridiculous after a while, so we decided to change it to the first person, because “I’m David LaMotte, and I approved this message,” as the political ads say.

I would suggest that you ask members of your group (or your group of one) to read the chapters associated with each section of the book before you gather for discussion. You may also want to send them the discussion questions in advance.

Each section of this study guide contains:

- A scripture reading.
- An activity to get everyone thinking and connecting.
- An examination of the intersection between that text and some of the ideas in that section’s chapters.
- A song to listen to. As a writer of songs as well as books, I have some songs that are relevant to the topics at hand, so I’m including some to check out if they hold interest for you. It feels a little self-absorbed, but I hope they will be useful to some folks.
- A hymn to sing together if you are inclined to do so.
- Discussion questions.
- If you choose to close with prayer, we invite you to ask a different person to lead that prayer each time you gather or pray in a cooperative way.

Please use the parts of each section that are useful to you and lay aside the rest. Listening to or singing a song or hymn may be a good tone-setting exercise for your group, or it may be a distraction. Some discussion questions may resonate more than others. We trust your discernment as to how to approach this with your own group. If you have suggestions as to how we can make this study guide better, please get in touch.

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Links

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Here is a page on my website with further resources for each section. This includes videos you might want to show during your discussion time, or to send around in advance for people to watch, and links to the songs and hymns I've named in each section.

By putting this page on a website rather than printing the links here, we will be able to continue to add to and update the resources over time. To check out these further resources, go to:

www.davidlamotte.com/studyguideresources

or

bit.ly/dlsgr
(lowercase)



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Part 1

Change

(Preface through Chapter 2)

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*From that time on Jesus began to preach,
"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."
— Matthew 4:17*
.....

According to the gospel of Matthew, Jesus began his ministry with the word, "Repent."

It seems to me that this word, repent, through centuries of interpretation, has largely come to be understood as "quit doing bad stuff." Indeed, Christianity, in the eyes of many people, comes down to a list of rules about things one shouldn't do.

My own mother grew up with a small-town Southern theology that she has described to me as, "Don't drink, don't dance, don't cuss, don't play cards..." That was pretty much the definition of a good Christian. But in my own reading of the Bible, it doesn't seem like Jesus spends much time on the 'No List.' It seems to me that he is mostly telling us, and modeling, what to *do*, proactively, rather than what to avoid.

But the word 'repent,' or *metanoieite*, in the Greek language in which it was first written down, doesn't mean 'quit being bad.' It is better translated as "be transformed," or "become something new." In a word, "change."

In the cultural context of the United States, Christianity is often seen as a movement to resist change, to preserve old ways of doing things. Certainly, there is value in preserving traditions that have served the world well, but the Bible is at its heart a collection of stories about transformation, and it is full of stories about the people of God demanding and enacting change. The prophets were constantly calling for change. It was arguably their main gig. Jesus most certainly challenged the status quo and encouraged us to do so as well.

Jesus calls us, both through his teaching and through his example, to practice what Rev. Dr. William Barber calls "holy interruption." He breaks a whole lot of rules in the name of love, from healing on the Sabbath to throwing over tables in the temple and challenging the legal stoning of a woman, to consorting with people who are considered to be bad people (on both ends of the political spectrum, incidentally: people who are wealthy, powerful, and in the good graces of the empire, and people who are poor, outcast, unclean, and rejected by Jesus' own people). So, it seems that his message is much deeper and more complex than a list of rules.

Jesus calls us to be transformed—fundamentally changed. We are called not only to believe but to *follow*. That means to literally move our bodies because of our faith—to show up and engage wherever people are hurting, which is pretty much everywhere, including this side of our own skins.

The amazing thing is that this engagement, in the end, also leads to 'having life and having it abundantly.' There is joy in community and in a measure of synthesis between our beliefs and our daily practices. None of us does that effectively all the time, but just about every time I manage to lean in that direction, God seems to come rushing to meet me, and that is indeed a great joy.

So, thank you for your willingness to engage in this conversation and your openness to transforming and being transformed.

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Part 1

Change

(Preface through Chapter 2)

Activity: Spectrum exercise

Tape a sign on one wall that says “strongly agree” and on the opposite wall tape one that says “strongly disagree.” Read one of the following statements and invite the members of the group to stand somewhere in the room along the spectrum between the poles in response to the statement (some people may be creative and may feel led to place themselves somewhere in the room other than on the spectrum to express how they relate to the statement). Invite folks in each place to speak about why they chose to stand where they stand. As the discussion unfolds, make sure that folks know they can change their minds and move along the spectrum as they hear from each other (where we stand is reflective of a snapshot in time, we are always invited to reflect and move).

Statements to respond to:

- Is there a right way to place toilet paper? If so, which is it - over or under?
- I am a morning person.
- I am an activist.
- Protests and demonstrations have lost their effectiveness in influencing social change.
- Our church/group is committed to justice work.
- Being a faithful Christian requires us to engage in social justice work.
- Faith doesn’t belong in politics.
- Having room for diversity of thought is more important than our church/group taking a collective stand on justice issues.
- It’s more important for our church/group to help individuals than to advocate for public policy (ex. feed hungry people vs. campaign for anti-poverty measures).
- I’m comfortable with having challenging conversations about issues some people might consider controversial in our church/group.

Hymn: *Canticle of the Turning*

Song: *Coming Alive Again*

(links at bit.ly/dlsgr)

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Discussion Questions

1. On p. 11, I shared my personal reasons for writing this book. What are *your* personal reasons for engaging with it? What do you imagine God's agenda to be for this conversation?
2. In the Introduction (p. xxvii), two ways to define 'Politics' are mentioned. What relationship does your faith have to your politics, using those two different definitions? What is the difference between saying, "God is on my side," and saying, "I'm trying to be on God's side." If the word 'politics' makes you uneasy, why?
3. On pages 19-21, we read about John Lewis' goal of feeling love for his oppressors at the very moment that they were beating him. We also look at another perspective, though, that has to do with treating people with respect, dignity, and compassion, even when we don't *feel* loving. Imagine yourself in a situation like that. How do you imagine yourself feeling? What do you imagine yourself doing? How does your perspective on this question shift if you perceive yourself in the role of the oppressor, rather than the victim? What else comes to the surface as you consider this question?
4. In an effort to clarify a challenging conversation, several words are defined in Chapter Two. What other words are easily misunderstood and might need to be defined? Why is having shared language necessary for transformation (or why not)?
5. Is your church involved in aid work? In justice work? In what ways does that work nourish the dignity and agency of everyone involved? In what ways might it damage dignity and agency? In what ways does it break down distinctions between helper and helped? In what ways does it strengthen them?
6. Do you consider yourself an activist? Why, or why not?

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Part 2

Hope & Heroes

(Chapters 3, 4 & 5)

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Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.' Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' But the Lord said to me, 'Do not say, "I am only a boy"; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.' Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, 'Now I have put my words in your mouth...' — Jeremiah 1:4-9 (NRSV)
.....

Looking at the massive and innumerable problems that face the world, it is not surprising that we feel overwhelmed. Who are we to confront such big issues and have any hope of having an impact? A sense of inadequacy seems like a natural response to the times in which we are living.

Yet things do change, and sometimes for the better. God moves through normal, flawed people, working together, to bring about the Kingdom (or the kin-dom, as some folks say). Still, when those plans involve you, not in a general sense, but you, the one reading these words, it is not surprising to feel daunted. It is hard to imagine feeling called by God to the work of making substantive changes in the world, and rising to the challenge.

Still, God keeps calling us.

I find some comfort in the fact that Biblical characters often seem to have the same reaction that I do. There is a conversation that God seems to have over and over with people in the Bible, with variations, and I can imagine that it might get tedious over time.

The script, as it often unfolds, goes something like this:

God: I have something I need you to do for me.

Prophet: You've got to be kidding. *Me?!*

And, usually, it's not just "I don't want to," but some form of "I'm not good enough."

Moses says, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh...?" (Ex. 3:11), then argues that God must have it wrong because "I have never been eloquent" (Ex 4:10). Sarah responds, incredulously, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?" (Genesis 18:11-15). Isaiah, caught up in his own inadequacy, cries, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:5). Amos, when asked to bear the word of God, responds, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees," (Amos 7:14) Jonah just turns tail and runs.

We must be astoundingly confident of our own inadequacy to say to God, "No, God, you are mistaken," *during a conversation with God*, but it seems to happen a lot. We seem to be much more confident in our own inadequacy than we are in the wisdom of God. Perhaps it would be better to lean courageously into a sense of call when we feel such a tug, but it seems to be a pretty rare reaction.

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I believe that all of us are called not to one Great Life Purpose, but to many small but significant ones. God doesn't generally speak to me through burning bushes, angels, or voices in the night, but I do sometimes feel what I have come to think of as a 'holy nudge.' And when I do, I am usually resistant. Often, that resistance comes from thinking I don't have what it takes to meet this problem. Could it be that God has thought this through? That God has a clearer understanding of our potential than we do? If so, I need to reexamine my own reaction.

Hymn to Sing Together: *Here I Am, Lord*
Song to listen to: *You May Do That*
(links at bit.ly/dlsgr)

Activity

Think of a time when your life trajectory changed, due to a move, a relationship, a job change, etc. What were some of the small factors that had to align for that change to occur? Pair off, trade stories, and discuss.

Part 2

Hope & Heroes

(Chapters 3, 4 & 5)

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Part 2

Hope & Heroes

(Chapters 3, 4 & 5)

Discussion Questions

1. On pages 35-38, we explore some of our cultural narratives about hope through a conversation with South Africa's Father Michael Lapsley. One common narrative is that hope is the enemy of experience; in other words, engaging with the hard realities of life tends to diminish hope. What has your life taught you about this question? How do the perspectives of Father Lapsley (pp. 35-36) inform that conversation?
2. When talking about heroes, we are not just talking about superheroes, but people we admire and sometimes lionize due to their extraordinary courage, strength, etc. Who are your heroes? Can you see yourself in them, or do they represent unattainable goals?
3. Hero stories are often presented as inspiring, and they can be. What was your gut response to the Wesley Autrey story on pp. 50-53? Could you see yourself making the same choice he made? Or do you imagine yourself too scared to respond? If you wanted to emulate his heroic model in your own life to address a large problem that you see in the world around you, what would you do, specifically? How would you get started?
4. As a culture, we spend a lot of time talking about 'leadership.' Did Jesus ask us to be leaders or followers? What are the implications of Jesus' teaching for how to go about engaging with the problems and possibilities around us? What is the difference between a leader and a hero?
5. Christianity is often understood as "Jesus saved me, and my obligation, in return, is to praise and worship him." An alternative view is, "Jesus has invited me into a new and counter-cultural way of living, to follow and join him in his work to transform the world and bring about the kin-dom of God." The former is a hero story, while the latter is a movement story. How does your own faith intersect with these narratives?
6. If you are part of a faith community with clergy leaders, does the hero narrative map onto your relationship with your pastor? To what degree is the 'hero' expected to fix things, and to what degree do you function as a movement working together to live out your faith?
7. Did the version of the Rosa Parks story presented here differ from your understanding of the story before now? If so, how? What lessons and instructions would you take from the popular version of her arrest? What do you take from this version?

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Part 3

Brokenness & Redemption

(Chapters 6, 7 & 8)

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He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So, when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" He answered, "An enemy has done this." The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" Then he left the crowds and went into the house.

— Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43

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Every page I read these days seems to remind me that we are living in an extraordinarily divisive time. There seem to be 'good guys and bad guys' depicted on every screen, and depending on your side of the political aisle, and your choice of media and social circle, they differ. One person's freedom fighter is another's terrorist.

The Netflix series 'The Good Place' depicts a fanciful version of the afterlife with comic brilliance and philosophical heft, taking a group of 'newly departed' folks through a journey of discovering how morality works, at least in the created universe of the show. Well into the series (spoiler alert!), the heroes of the show make the astounding discovery that no one has gotten into 'The Good Place' in centuries because modern life is so morally complex. The intricate web of exploitation that is tied to each action we take, from brushing our teeth to driving to work to buying a shirt, has made it impossible to score enough 'good' points, and few enough 'bad' points, to get into heaven.

Clearly, the whole concept of a point system for salvation is theologically problematic, and a focus on what happens after we die rather than how we live while we are here feels misguided to me. If we can set that aside for a moment, though, the show's writers are making a pretty solid point about how the morals and ethics of modern life seem impossible to navigate with integrity. Everything we do is fraught.

But Jesus never asked us to be 'good enough.' God never expected or wanted us to earn our way into heaven — the heaven of living in God's presence now, or the heaven of living in God's presence eternally. God's love is a gift of grace. We do not have to earn it. None of us would be capable of that, anyway. All our efforts yield both weeds and wheat. As the One who created us, God knows this, and still uses us for the nourishment of the kin-dom, sometimes using our very brokenness for the work of healing. It's expected that we will stumble, the question is whether we are trying to stumble toward the Light.

So, the goal is not to appease an angry God through good works in the world, and thereby score enough points to go to the Good Place. The goal is to find some way to respond today to the extraordinary gift of God's love, and in so doing, embody it. Jesus made it clear that the best way we can do that is to care for each other's tangible needs, including interrupting systems that make people needy in the first place.

To do that, we don't have to be heroes, and we don't have to be perfect, but we do have to show up and choose to get involved.

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Part 3

Brokenness & Redemption

(Chapters 6, 7 & 8)

Activity

You may have played a game where players write the names of famous characters, fictional or real, on small pieces of paper and put them in a bowl, hat, etc. and pick one out without looking at it. Players then hold the cards they have drawn on their foreheads or backs so that others can read them, but that player can't. Usually, you then take turns asking other players yes or no questions about the person you've been assigned, trying to figure out who it is.

This game may go a little quicker — instead of asking questions, players will describe the person you have with one word. You will try to guess from those clues and see how many words you need to get there.

At the end, gather up and talk about what was surprising and what wasn't, and whether there were themes that emerged.

Hymn to Sing Together: *Spirit of the Living God*

Song to listen to: *Peter*

(links at bit.ly/dlsgr)

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Discussion Questions

1. On pages 62-63, there is a story of a friend's offhand comment and the huge significance it had for my music career. Looking at the corners on your own life trajectory — when you were headed in one direction, and then something caused you to head in another — what were the small factors and encounters that led to those decisions?
2. Throughout Chapter 8, we wrestle with several difficult questions about how our own good intentions can get tangled up and lead to problematic outcomes. Have you ever experienced a dilemma like this in your own life? In your family? In your church? What happened? What role did your faith play in it? What did you learn?
3. In Jesus' day, the Greeks often believed in what we now call dualism: the idea that life falls into simple, clear categories (good vs. bad, life vs. death, light vs. dark, flesh vs. spirit). Where have you encountered that kind of thinking? How has this perspective been helpful to you and your community? How has it been unhelpful?
4. In contrast to the Greeks, Hebrews tended to believe that life was often nuanced and ambiguous - that these things were often tangled up in one another like weeds tangled up with wheat. They believed that it was not always easy to separate one from the other. How has this perspective been helpful to you and your community? How has it been unhelpful?
5. Considering your responses to questions 4 and 5, how do these perspectives inform your faith and the way you live that faith out in the world?
6. On p. 83, we find "'First, do no harm' is a popular mantra among people working for positive change, and a core tenet of the Hippocratic oath. I don't think it's a realistic promise, though. Sometimes even the most successful efforts simultaneously do real harm." Do you think that's true? Does that perspective have meaningful implications for how you view your own work in the world? ... for how you view others' work?

Part 3

Brokenness & Redemption

(Chapters 6, 7 & 8)

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Part 4

Community & Movement

(Chapters 9, 10 & 11)

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"Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound, the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?'" — Acts 2:5-9

"In community, we work out our connectedness to God, to one another, and to ourselves. It is in community where we find out who we really are. It is life with another that shows my impatience and life with another that demonstrates my possessiveness and life with another that gives notice to my nagging devotion to the self. Life with someone else, in other words, doesn't show me nearly as much about his or her shortcomings as it does about my own.... In human relationships, I learn that theory is no substitute for love. It is easy to talk about the love of God; it is another thing to practice it." — Joan Chittister

.....

Revisiting a story from the book...

I have lived in Black Mountain, North Carolina, since the mid-1990's, and for almost all that time in a small house on a fairly busy road. I moved to this town of about 9,000 folks as a broke young musician, and I still love it as much as I did then, across its growth and changes.

Roughly twenty-five years ago, a big change came to my neighborhood, and it was a change for the better. In response to the tireless agitation of some residents, the town decided to build a sidewalk on my road. I was amazed to see the shifts that came in response to that decision.

In the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election, so much of that community-building progress seemed to be undone. People were scared to talk with each other. Half of us were in deep grief, mourning, and fear for where we were headed. The other half were celebrating. The topic was almost unavoidable, but it was so awkward, and potentially toxic, that people were afraid to talk with each other. Emotions were running so high that if we found ourselves on opposite sides of the question, the conversation quickly felt volatile, so people were just avoiding any connection whatsoever.

It was the anti-Pentecost. We spoke the same language, but simply couldn't understand each other. I felt like the town had come in and ripped out all the sidewalks.

Among the reasons I felt heartbroken in those days was this damage to the sense of community in my neighborhood. One night over dinner, my family was talking about it, and in my frustration, I said, "I just want to nail a sign to the front of the house that says, 'I'm your neighbor! If your car battery is dead, you can knock on my door, no matter who you voted for. I will give you a jump.'"

Then it occurred to me that I know how to have banners made. I've done it a few times for my work, for one occasion or another. So, I started to consider what such a sign would actually say if we really decided to put one up. After some conversation with Deanna and Mason (because it's their house, too), we came up with a sign that says, "You are our neighbors. No matter who you vote for, your skin color, where you are from, your faith, or who you love, we will try to be here for you. That's what community means. Let's be neighbors."

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I had the sign made. Eight feet tall and three feet wide. Mason and I nailed it to the front of our house on Christmas Eve that year, and it remained there until we moved away. Over the years, it has provoked some good conversations, which was the goal, and a bit of pushback, too. Generally, the latter takes one of two forms: folks who see it as ‘making nice’ in the face of serious injustice, and grammar nerds who want it to say ‘whom’. The latter group is right, of course, but I’m going with the colloquial. The former folks, I think, are missing something. The sign doesn’t say that despite these things, everything’s cool. It says that despite these things, “we will try to be here for you.” Not because our disagreements don’t matter, but because they *do*. In light of serious injustice and massive issues to face, our best hope to find a way forward together is to know each other. People are seldom rejected into making more compassionate decisions. Relationship is almost always a precursor to transformation.

At Pentecost, people who were speaking in many languages miraculously understood each other. In this time of anti-Pentecost, even though we speak the same language, we often fail to understand each other. The work of peace and reconciliation, to which Jesus calls us again and again, requires that we make real and sustained effort to come to know people who see the world differently from us. That deep listening is not easy, but we worship a God of miracles, a God who turns last year’s compost into this year’s flowers and vegetables, a God who can heal things — even broken relationships. If we are to make way for the kin-dom, we may find that it would be wise to sit down together, to reorient from asking how ‘we’ will deal with ‘them,’ and instead expand our understanding of the boundaries of ‘us.’

In Luke 10:29, when Jesus was asked “who is my neighbor,” he answered with the most radically challenging example he could think of. Samaritans were not just unpopular; they were despised by the Hebrew people with whom Jesus was talking. Both Samaritan and Hebrew leaders forbade any contact whatsoever with the other side. Jesus did not cast the Samaritan as the person in need of help in his story, but as the helper. Then he told his listeners to “go and do likewise.” In other words, be like a Samaritan. It’s a wonder they didn’t kill him right then.

I can’t help but believe that we are still asked to reach across the lines we find most challenging and try to love each other. It’s not easy, but it’s the work before us.

Activity

Bring 8 1/2 x 11 sheets of paper cut in half on the long axis. Make sure everyone has paper and markers/crayons.

Bumper stickers, though limited, can communicate so much. Think about the story about the sign that the LaMotte family hung to reach across many of the ways we separate ourselves from one another. Then you are invited to create your own bumper sticker to provoke thought or reach out in love to those who see it. Share with the whole group or in pairs. Hang them in the room.

Hymn to sing together: *For Everyone Born*
Song to listen to: *Get Together (Abraham Jam)*
(links at bit.ly/dlsgr)

Part 4 Community & Movement

(Chapters 9, 10 & 11)

YOU are
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neighbors.
No matter
who you vote
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Part 4

Community & Movement

(Chapters 9, 10 & 11)

Discussion Questions

1. In Chapter 9, we look at toxic movements. Given that churches have often taken the side of oppressors against the oppressed, how can we, as people of faith, know when we are working for positive changes rather than being recruited into toxic movements?
2. On page 105, there is a story about Pete Seeger moving chairs around just before a concert in New York. "He simply began, and people noticed." Has a ministry in your congregation ever begun this way? Someone simply began, and others noticed and joined in? What did it look like? How did the community respond?
3. On p. 121, we read of a night spent in jail with Rev. Barber, Rev. Spearman, and others: "I cannot imagine going through the arrest and night in jail without those other men with me." Can you remember a time when your congregation "lifted each other up" in hard times?
4. In Matthew 5, Jesus exhorted his followers to love their enemies. What does that mean to you? On page 110, we read about humanizing our opponents as well as our heroes. Recognizing one's shared interests with an enemy, where they overlap, can be a first step towards building relationships. Have you ever seen this happen? What did it look like?
5. On p.123-126, we look at common ways that communities respond to bigotry and overt aggression: 1) Fighting violence with violence, or hatred with hatred, or 2.) Avoidance (ignoring their speech and actions). The story of the Coup Clutz Clowns, who used playful, irreverent humor at a Klan rally, could be described as a Third Way strategy (in Walter Wink's terminology), which, by definition, requires *creativity*. In what ways has your church encountered inequality and/or prejudice in your own congregation or community (big or small)? How has your congregation responded?
6. In Chapter 12, "Stumbling Toward the Light," we read about the founding of a non-profit that works in Guatemala and some of the missteps involved in the founding of an organization that has gone on to do decades of good and important work. We are invited to sit in the tension of being vigilant about the ways our actions can be problematic without allowing that to paralyze us, and to acknowledge that this work is messy. "Beyond the glossy ads and fundraising letters, the best projects have negative consequences," he writes, "and the worst likely have some positives." In this way, we are *all* "stumbling towards the light." Do you resonate with that perspective? As a person? As a congregation?

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Part 5

Discernment & Vocation

(Chapters 12-19)

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Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. — 1 Cor. 12:4-13

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I have come to believe that the biggest division within Christendom is neither Catholic/Protestant, nor Evangelical/Mainline, nor Liberal/Conservative, but Hero/Movement.

Just as there is danger in reducing Rosa Parks' life to one dramatic, heroic day, and neglecting the decades of work, struggle, and sacrifice she offered the world around her, there is danger in reducing Jesus' life and ministry to his death and resurrection.

Yet this is not uncommon. I once had a conversation with another Christian where I raised questions about Jesus' teachings on justice and economics and my conversation partner responded by saying, "I think the main thing is that I let Jesus into my heart. I don't worry too much about the stuff he said." It seems to me that Jesus said what he said and did what he did because he wanted us to pay attention and do the things that he asked of us.

The Hero Narrative and the Movement Narrative map onto Christianity in fascinating ways. The former tells Jesus' story as, "Jesus died for me and paid the price for my sins," end of story. The latter says, "Jesus also came to teach and model radical faithfulness, and to invite us to join him in living our devotion to God and each other in our daily lives, by living out God's love in the world."

When we do choose to dig into the things he said, and the model he offered, and experiment with taking those teachings seriously in our daily lives, we often find that life gets messier. But it also becomes more whole, more beautiful, and more authentic.

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Part 5

Discernment & Vocation

(Chapters 12-19)

Activity

Bring palm-sized river rocks to the class, smooth enough and big enough to write on with permanent markers. Write a prompt on newsprint or on a screen that asks participants to take a moment in silence to think about what suffering in the world has the potential to paralyze and overwhelm them, then choose one of those things and write it on a rock.

Place the rocks on a table at the center, maybe with a candle, and pray together.

Then offer another prompt, asking people to consider the antidotes to the immobilizing words they wrote down. What forces in the world can move these issues in better directions? Pick up the rocks again and write those words on another side of the rocks.

Pray together again, play some music, and invite participants to place the rocks on the table. Pick up someone else's rock and say a silent prayer of support for each other, recognizing that all these issues are easier to manage with the mutual support of a community. At the end, people can take the rocks with them, throw them in a lake, or leave them there on the table. Think about what will work best for your group.

Note: If river rocks are hard to find in your area try a craft store, search online for "painting rocks", or use pieces of wood or whatever other creative material you can think of.

Hymn to sing together: *Be Thou My Vision*

Song to listen to: *Taste the Light*

(links at bit.ly/dlsgr)

Discussion Questions

1. In its first chapter, the gospel of Mark tells the story of Jesus and his followers visiting the hometown of one of his disciples (1:29-39). During their visit, Jesus becomes a local celebrity. "The whole city was gathered around the door," Mark writes (v. 33). But Jesus is unsettled. He sneaks out in the middle of the night to reflect and pray. As overwhelming as the need here is, Jesus is filled with a sense from the Spirit that, in this moment, they have done what they were called to do, and it is time to move on. How do you and your church determine when something is *not* yours to do, or is *no longer* your calling?
2. There is a difference between asking, "What am I supposed to do with my life?" and "Where am I called right now?" What spiritual practices have helped you avoid being paralyzed by feeling overwhelmed? Can you think of a time when it served you and others to scale things down?

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Part 5

Discernment & Vocation

(Chapters 12-19)

3. On page 162, we explore positive callings (callings that invite us to build something new) and negative callings (callings that call us to stand in the way because something is wrong). Jesus encountered several “negative callings” throughout his ministry, where he interrupted power for the sake of justice (the woman accused of adultery, overturning tables in the temple). What are some of the urgent needs in your community that may be tugging at your church today? Do they require standing against power? How do we determine when we are called to interrupt systems?
4. On page 171, we read about civil rights activist and Congressman John Lewis: “Even in the face of the great sacrifices he has made, his work has unquestionably made him ‘come alive.’ He is quick to smile and laugh, and no stranger to joy.” The Apostle Paul (who was also no stranger to pain and sacrifice) described this deep inner joy for service as our spiritual gifts being “activated” by God (1 Cor. 12:4-7). What gifts of service to the community bring your congregation the most joy or excitement? What does your congregation bring to the community?
5. The “Spectrum of Allies” (p. 200) is an organizing tool that can illuminate how subtle shifts can lead to significant change and transformation within a community. As you reflect on your own story, or on your church’s history, can you identify a time when similar subtle shifts led to important changes? How did it happen? What led to the change?
6. There are several stories in Chapter 18 about identity and its significance in various contexts. How would you describe your community’s identity? How would you describe your church’s identity? What are the gifts and challenges of each? What is missing from your church community?
7. How do you care for your spirit and body? Do you consider it a part of being faithful to tend to your own well-being?
8. Being faithful sometimes requires suffering, but it does not follow that suffering is inherently faithful. How can you tell the difference?

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Part 6

Pick One

(Discernment Questions)

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After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." — Luke 10:1-9

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Song: *We Are Each Other's Angels*
Hymn: *God of the Movements and Martyrs*
 (links at bit.ly/dlsgr)

This may well be the most challenging gathering for your study group. Discernment is hard work. It is difficult to figure out where we are feeling called in this moment, and how to translate our leadings into concrete action. It is also hard to deprogram ourselves from the Hero Narrative — it seems like we need to do something on a grand scale for it to matter, and it seems like we should figure it out alone, and then do it alone, too.

To those challenges I will add one more — it's hard to give our *first* answer rather than our *best* answer. In discussing the questions in the last section of the book, I encourage your group to nudge each other not to overthink this. We are talking about *small* things we can do *in community*. Those small things may well be part of big shifts, but it is smaller, achievable callings that we are trying to name, not our Life's Great Purpose.

So here is an opportunity to experiment with a new way of thinking about what it looks like to love the world around us, and the people in it. Let's try out the Movement lens, rather than the Hero lens. The following pages contain five questions that may help you discern where you are called right now, and what your next steps might be.

I'm inclined toward taking these questions one at a time, rather than reading them in advance, and answering each question before you consider the next. You may want to read through them in advance, but I think it's more effective to consider each question individually.

I think it's important to write down the answers to these questions, rather than just considering them in your mind, so you will want to be sure to have paper and pens available. Read the first question and set a five-minute timer to write down the answers. That's quick, but it's important that these are "first thing that pops into your head" answers.

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At the end of the questions, have people get into pairs (like the verse above, they weren't sent out alone) and read the last section, "Rinse and Repeat," and then have some time to reflect on their experiences of the exercise:

- Share your answers with each other.
- What questions were you able to answer?
- What questions does this exercise leave you with? What are the next steps to exploring those questions?
- What surprised you, if anything, about your own answers?
- Re-gather as a group and invite sharing.
- Are there any confluences of calling? Places where folks might work together?
- If you found this exercise helpful, how often do you think it would be good to do it individually? As a faith community?

You may wish to close with a sending prayer that invites us all to be guided in our efforts and blesses folks in their roles as world changers.

Thank you for taking the time to explore this book. I would love to hear from you with feedback. Please feel free to contact me through my website, davidlamotte.com. And thank you, most of all, for being the kind of person who *wants* to have a positive impact. That's step one. Blessings on the journey.

— David LaMotte

Part 6

Pick One

(Discernment Questions)

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