

Leading Churches into 21st Century Missions: 13 Lessons in Acts

Leaders Guide



13 online adult Sunday school lessons

Produced in partnership with Alabama Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of South Carolina and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Global Missions

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A Leading Churches into 21st Century Missions: 13 Lessons in Acts
Students Guide is also available from Acacia Resources
(www.acaciaresources.com).

Preface

Several years ago a concept began to seep into dialogue about Christian missions and quickly caught on, becoming modus operandi in at least some evangelical circles.

It sounds like a logical approach: discover where God is working and become involved. It properly acknowledges God and God's activity in the world. It challenges people to join God in the divine plan. Who could argue with it?

Perhaps the biggest argument is not so much where it begins, but where it ends and what it skips. It implies simultaneously that the ways of God are easily discernable and that the divine plan requires a secret decoder ring in order to figure out. Further, it seems to assume that there are places where God is not at work.

Our limited vision might lead us to believe that is the case. Many people throughout the world live in oppression, ignorance and poverty. Evil and violence prevail. Governments are hostile to Christians and the gospel of Christ. Professing Christianity is illegal in some countries. Even in places where it is not, people often pay a great price, sometimes with their lives, when they denounce the state- or culturally-imposed religion and convert to Christianity. Many people simply appear uninterested in the message of Christ; others view Christianity as one of several equally viable options in the cafeteria of spirituality.

But are these signs that God is silent, even absent? Are there places and people among whom God is not working out the divine plan?

Both scripture and history tell us otherwise. The tomb that stood closed, dark and silent only later to open and release

the resurrected Christ testifies to the fact that God does miraculous things we often cannot see in places we are afraid to go. Our lack of awareness neither limits nor denies God's activity, then and now.

Acts 1:8 has long been the missions rallying point, the flagpole around which evangelical Christians gather and then disperse with their missions marching orders. While we cannot overlook its importance, we can in our exuberance to live it fly past the lessons the first Christians learned as they formed the church and began to do what we now call missions.

The exciting missionary journeys of people like Barnabas, Timothy, Paul and Silas often lure us away from the first 15 chapters of Acts, though this portion of scripture offers a rich missions textbook straight from the lives of Jesus' earliest followers. We sometimes expect to duplicate the results they achieved without first establishing the foundation they built and developing the skills they acquired.

One of the most significant things we bypass is the Christian church's Jewish legacy. God's divine plan of salvation was first disclosed in Hebrew scripture, and the offer of salvation went first to the Jews. The early Christian church was originally comprised of Jews. Salvation was offered also to Gentiles not because Jews outright rejected it but because of God's saving work among Jews who chose to repent and follow Jesus. God intended salvation for everyone from the beginning.

The early Christian church described in Acts was concerned about keeping its Jewish heritage and integrated traditional Jewish practices into their corporate life, gathering regularly in believers' homes. Fellowship was important to them, so much that they became a community that held

“all things in common” (see Acts 2:44). As a gift of salvation, God gave this community the Holy Spirit that enabled them to act according to God's plan.

The presence of the Holy Spirit within the entire community equipped the people to understand what they were supposed to do and how they were supposed to live. Their loyalty and devotion to each other and to Jesus reordered their priorities, possessions and practices and caused them to live counter-culturally. Class distinctions and their resulting inequalities disappeared, fostering a unity unlike anything the people had ever experienced.

Early on they learned how to identify and resolve internal conflicts and compromise, realizing that their faith, friendships and witness would suffer if they did not. Because they did not become endlessly mired in disputes, they crossed barriers and built bridges to those with whom they could share a witness.

They had no roadmap, no guidebook for how to do “missions,” a word Christian scripture does not even use. They had the Holy Spirit, whose direction led them to think and act in new ways about themselves and others and give testimony about the new life they experienced because of the resurrected Christ.

They learned the wisdom and value of setting apart certain individuals to work in places they all could not go. By hearing reports from these who represented them, they participated in their work by praying knowledgeably and effectively.

Among evangelical denominations, Baptists have a rich missions history and a reputation for doing many things well. Missionary-sending agencies have historically played

key roles in advancing the gospel message. But the changing world landscape demands constant assessment of mission strategies and priorities.

The regular influx of new believers and others with narrow or nonexistent missions foundations offers ongoing opportunities for the church to reexamine biblical principles and determine how to apply them to 21st century missions efforts. As it was in the first century, the center and primary agent of global missions in the 21st century must be the local church.

The first half of the book of Acts provides a valuable primer for this fresh look. The lesson writers represent significant global diversity within the broader Baptist family and provide insights from a variety of missions experiences and settings. Allow their perspectives to help shape your understandings of what it means to do missions today.

Written by Jan Turrentine, managing editor for Acacia Resources, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Speaking All Languages Leaders Guide

Acts 2:1-12

¹When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. ⁷Amazed 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? ⁹Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, ¹¹Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." ¹²All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"

Theme: The church must meet the joyous occasions and challenging dilemmas it encounters among different languages and cultures with flexibility and humility.

Before You Teach

► Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

► Guide adults to think about the challenges of communicating through spoken language by asking them to answer the following questions:

- *How many different languages and dialects are spoken around the world?*
- *What is the difference between a language and a dialect?*
- *What is the most difficult language in the world to learn, and why?*
- *How many different languages are spoken on the continent of Africa?*
- *What are the most widely spoken languages in the world? Which of these is the most widely spoken?*
- *Which country has more English speakers than the United States?*
- *How many different languages are spoken in the country of India?*

► After adults have attempted to answer the questions, supplement their responses with the following facts:

- There are more than 2,700 languages in the world; in addition, there are more than 7,000 dialects. Linguists differ on an exact count because they do not always agree on whether two languages are different or if one is actually a dialect of the other. A dialect is a regional variety of a language that has a different pronunciation, vocabulary or meaning.
- Basque, which is spoken in northwestern Spain and southwestern France, is believed to be the most difficult language to learn because it is not related to any other language in the world. It has an extremely complicated word structure and vocabulary.
- More than 1,000 different languages are spoken on the continent of Africa. Somalia is the only African country in which the entire population speaks the same language, Somali. The Berbers of North Africa have no written form of their language. Many languages in Africa include a “click” sound pronounced simultaneously with other sounds. In order to know how to form this sound properly, people must begin learning in childhood.
- Mandarin Chinese is the most widely spoken language in the world, with well over 1 billion speakers. It is followed by English, Hindustani, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, Bengali, Portuguese, Japanese and standard German. The rank and approximate number of speakers of these languages depends upon which linguistic studies one consults.
- According to some linguists, China has more English speakers than the United States.

- In the country of India alone, people speak 16 different languages and more than 1600 different dialects. Both Hindi and English are the official languages of India.
- ▶ Ask adults to relate personal experiences that illustrate the difficulty of communicating with people for whom English is not the primary language. Guide discussion by asking such questions as these:
- *What were the circumstances of your cross-cultural communication?*
 - *What language did the other person(s) speak?*
 - *What were you trying to communicate?*
 - *Was your message urgent?*
 - *What made the conversation frustrating or difficult?*
 - *How did you overcome the language barriers?*
- ▶ If your group includes individuals for whom English is not their first language, ask them to explain some of the resulting challenges they have experienced.
- ▶ Point out that from its very beginnings, the Christian church has been confronted with the reality of different languages and cultures. At the outset, the accounts in Acts recognize both the diversity of humanity due to geography, language and ethnicity and the commonality people find as a result of God's Spirit. Humanity's diversity presents opportunities both for celebration and for dilemma. Successful Christian missions efforts recognize and respect this diversity and greet it with flexibility and humility.

Explore the Bible

- ▶ Read aloud Acts 1:1-4 and call attention to the instructions Jesus left with his apostles: "While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father" (v 4).

Note the events in Chapter 1 that follow Jesus' ascension; then read aloud Acts 2:1. The apostles had done as Jesus had instructed them and were "all together in one place," although we're not told why. The writer indicates that it was Pentecost, so it is possible they had gathered because of this Jewish festival. It's also possible they had been holding regular meetings. Suggest that regardless of the writer's purpose for including this information, the amazing events that follow have come to represent Pentecost for Christians.

- ▶ Ask a volunteer to read aloud Acts 2:2-11 and lead adults to discuss it by asking such questions as:
- *Within what context has this passage been generally presented to you for study? Have you ever considered it within the context of missions?*
 - *What interpretations have you heard of the phenomena of "the rush of a violent wind," "divided tongues, as of fire" and a "tongue" resting on each person present?*
 - *How have you interpreted these events in the past? What do you think happened, and why?*

- ▶ Suggest that some scholars believe the book of Acts is written as a parallel to Luke's Gospel. If that is the case, this event seems to correspond with Jesus' baptism when

God's Spirit descended upon him. It also reflects John's statement from Luke 3:16 that Jesus would "baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

Lead adults to explore the sequence of events as recorded in scripture by asking:

- *Why do you think God sent the Spirit accompanied by such vivid and unusual special effects?*
 - *Initially the "tongues of fire" came and rested on each of those who had gathered in the house (vv 2-3), yet moments later a crowd had gathered. What caused the crowd to come to the house?*
 - *What do you think the crowd—"devout Jews from every nation under heaven"—heard that caused them to go to the house where the apostles had gathered? What caused them to drop what they were doing and rush to the scene?*
 - *What did the Spirit enable the apostles to do?*
 - *What did the Spirit enable the crowd to do?*
 - *What do you think the apostles were saying? What did the crowds hear?*
- Remind adults of the point in history at which people began to speak different languages. Read aloud Genesis 11:1-9; then ask:
- *Why do you think God "confused the language of all the earth" (v 9)?*
 - *What were the people doing that led God to take this action? Was this a form of punishment?*

- *How do language and ethnicity help people connect with each other? with God?*
- *How do language and ethnicity sometimes result in barriers that prevent people from connecting with each other? with God?*
- *How do you interpret the events of Acts 2 in light of the events much earlier at Babel?*
- *How do language and culture affect the way people hear and receive the gospel message?*
- *How should differences in language and culture affect the way Christians relate the gospel message?*

Apply Biblical Truth

► Lead adults to begin to apply the truths of this scripture by posing the question of those in the crowd on this occasion: "What does this mean?" (v 12). As you recall the following facts, ask them to suggest their significance, then and now:

- God's Spirit rested on each person who was present, enabling both speech and hearing (understanding) that were previously not possible.
- The coming of God's Spirit was a communal event, not an individualized or personalized experience.
- "Devout Jews from every nation under heaven" apparently composed the crowd that day.

- The coming of God's Spirit was an exciting and special occasion and dictated that explanation or proclamation of some kind follow.
- God's Spirit recognized the diversity of the world's peoples by communicating with them in the languages they understood.

► Ask adults to suggest some universally recognized symbols or icons, things that a person in practically any country of the world would understand. For example, two overlapping yellow French fries formed in the shape of the letter M suggest to billions of people around the world a certain hamburger chain. Ask:

- *Is this true of the Christian faith? Are there universal symbols for the gospel message that communicate cross-culturally? Why or why not?*
- *Are there symbols or words Western Christians use in communicating the gospel that are actually hindrances to people of other languages and cultures?*
- *To what degree do you think Western Christians have "gone into the world" with a gospel message that has a decidedly Western flavor?*
- *To what extent do you think churches started in other countries by Western Christians reflect the cultures and ethnicities of the people in those countries? of Western Christians?*

► Point out the Students Guide lesson writer's observations from his experiences working with two different Chris-

tian missions organizations and the differences he observed between the paternalistic and partnership models.

Close by noting his conclusions about the modern missionary movement's tendency to "go out in the name of Jesus and take control of the world."

Suggest that the alternative is not only closer to the early church's model; it also more closely resembles the model of Christ: "Fitting ourselves into the place the world offers us calls us to be bent and broken. What the book of Acts shows us as we follow its story is that the church grows into the space the world allows for it. The Spirit in Acts gives the gathered community the grace to rejoice in and endure the brokenness this encounter with culture requires."

Forming Fellowship Leaders Guide

Acts 2:41-47

⁴¹So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 4:32-35

³²Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Theme: A healthy Christian community with core values of unity and sharing is essential for effective 21st century missions.

Before You Teach

- ▶ Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- ▶ The illustration suggested for introducing this lesson comes from a deleted scene from the movie "We Were Soldiers." Be advised that the movie itself contains sustained sequences of graphic war violence and includes regular use of profanity. This deleted scene, however, available only on the DVD version, offers a worthwhile example. To read a review of this movie, go to: www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=413.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- ▶ Begin by suggesting that in life, as in movies and television shows, often the story-behind-the-story holds as much value as the story everyone eventually sees. Such is the case in a deleted but poignant scene from the otherwise graphically violent 2002 film, "We Were Soldiers." One scene, available only on the DVD, provides a valuable illustration of unity, sharing and community.

The scene shows the wives and family members of soldiers from the first division to enter into direct combat with the

North Vietnamese. They are in the base's Protestant chapel.

Only days after their husbands/fathers have gone off to war, the families gather for worship. The pastor introduces a young woman who is supposed to sing a solo. She begins singing, haltingly, the words from the hymn "The Solid Rock," but has to stop, apologize and begin again a couple of times. After a few seconds, another woman's voice is heard singing, "On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand."

The woman is the division commander's wife, and soon other women and then the entire congregation join her. Together they strongly and successfully do what the one woman was unable to do alone. Because of the support of the entire faith community, she is able to give voice to the faith that is alive in her but that her fear and uncertainty had momentarily silenced.

► Note that in its early stages, the Christian church was uncertain and probably sometimes fearful, just like the woman trying to sing alone in church. By banding together into a deliberate community of support and sharing, the early Christians fostered a movement that eventually reached the ends of the known world. Had they worked independently and without regard for each other, their efforts likely would have sputtered and been not nearly so powerful.

The story-behind-the-story of the amazing spread of the Christian gospel by the early church comes in part from the fellowship this community of faith created and worked to sustain.

Explore the Bible

► Lead adults to formulate a definition of Christian fellowship, given the following background:

While fellowship is essentially a New Testament concept, we can best understand it with Hebrew scripture in the background. The Israelites kept the covenant relationship God established and maintained with them by observing certain practices, holy days and feasts and keeping Torah. This covenant relationship made Israel different from all other ancient peoples, and it also created a sense of unity among the Israelites.

The covenant relationship, however, was between God and the people as a whole, not between God and individuals.

Christian fellowship became possible with Jesus' incarnation. When people accepted God's offer of salvation through Jesus and began to live in a parent-child relationship with God as a result, they also found new relationships with others in God's family. Jesus bound individuals to God and to each other. Out of this bond grew a fellowship characterized by joy, hope and love and a movement that boldly delivered God's gospel message.

Christian fellowship, then, is two-dimensional: God through Jesus Christ to individuals, and individual believers to each other. Paul would later amplify Christian fellowship to include sharing in Christ's sufferings and working in partnership to spread the gospel.

Scripture is clear that Christian fellowship doesn't just happen. It requires sustained effort.

► Note that Acts 2:41-47 and Acts 4:32-35 are two in a series of passages from Acts that serve as transitions between major sections of scripture. The first follows the

events of Pentecost and the results of Peter’s sermon that day. The second follows the appearance of Peter and John before the council of the chief priests, rulers and elders. Both offer a picture of the story-behind-the-story—a glimpse of the day-to-day life of the Christian community and the fellowship the believers established.

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud Acts 2:41-43 and call attention to the four things to which the believers devoted themselves: the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers. Elaborate on each, using information from the Students Guide.

Then deal with the obvious question: *What did the apostles teach?*

Call attention to the various ideas from the Students Guide that suggest the content of the apostles’ teachings. Remind the class that the Gospels as we know them were not written until many years later, so the early church had no written “curriculum.” The apostles likely relied on their personal experiences with Jesus and his teaching and included the facts surrounding Jesus’ resurrection. They probably also relied upon Old Testament prophecies and reinterpreted them to show how Christ had fulfilled them.

Ask:

- *How did the apostles’ teaching help nurture fellowship, unity and sharing?*
- *How does effective teaching today help foster a healthy Christian community of fellowship?*

► Also call attention to “The Didache” and the Apostles’ Creed, as explained in the Students Guide. Note that while

Baptists have traditionally not incorporated the recitation of this creed into their worship and other gatherings because it evades the teachings of Jesus, many Christian denominations have, and many churches recite the creed each time they gather.

While earlier thought attributed this creed to the apostles on the day of Pentecost, it likely didn’t come into existence in its final form until hundreds of years later. The earliest apostles may, however, have had some statement of faith they asked other believers to recite as part of their baptism, such as “Jesus is Lord,” or “Jesus is the Christ.”

If adults express interest, ask if anyone can recite the Apostles’ Creed. While it exists with slight variations today, following is one version:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

► Ask volunteers to read aloud Acts 2:44-47 and Acts 4:32-35 and lead adults to define or explain the phrase “all things in common.” Note that for the early Christians, their community of faith became their primary commitment, one to which

they gave all they had in terms of time, money and other resources.

Lead adults to explore the concept of “all things in common” as it applies to your church by asking:

- *To what degree do you see our church as a place where we hold “all things in common?”*
- *How do our times of worship, prayer, study and fellowship contribute to this way of life?*
- *To what degree do you think we compartmentalize our lives, to the point that church, family, work, school and other aspects of our lives do not connect at all?*
- *Do we tend to hold back certain areas of our lives from our community of faith?*
- *How do you think our fellowship compares with that of the earliest Christian believers?*

► Note that according to the example from the early Christian community, we function most effectively not when we are self-sufficient, but when we depend on and share a common life based in Christ. That responsibility extends beyond the local church and touches the wider Christian community, affecting how we do missions.

Apply Biblical Truth

► Recall for adults the 2000 movie “Chocolat,” in which a woman and her daughter open a chocolate shop in a small French village. In the process, the community’s rigid moral-

ity is shaken up, and the people are forced to reconsider what they believe and why.

In his Easter homily, Pere Henri, the young priest, says something like, “I want to talk about Christ’s humanity, I mean how he lived his life on earth: his kindness, his tolerance. We must measure our goodness, not by what we don’t do, what we deny ourselves, what we resist, or who we exclude. Instead, we should measure ourselves by what we embrace, what we create, and who we include.”

Suggest that healthy Christian communities embrace a common faith in Christ and a common commitment to each other. Together they create an inclusive fellowship of unity and sharing that enables them to expand their witness and ministry in effective missions endeavors.

► Close by relating some of the experiences of Jaime Steiert, a student who participated through CBF’s Student.Go program with Sowing Seeds of Hope, a rural poverty initiative. During her first week on the job in Marion, Alabama, Steiert worshipped at the Berean Baptist Church, the largest African-American church in town. Marion is in Perry County, which is one of the five poorest counties in the United States.

Steiert, who is white, had the opportunity to take communion with Berean’s church members. “Stone-still in awe, tears rolling down my face, I knew one thing for certain: I was welcome here, and I was home,” she said.

“We all come to the table of Christ as people in need. . . . We come to the table of grace to be made one. Unity comes when we are willing to lay down our lives for our friends, to be real about the poverty of the soul which plagues all of us. . . . We are not labeled at Christ’s table.

We are all the least, all invited to partake of the fullness of Christ together. [O]n the leveling surface of the communion table, the voice that calls us all heavenward to the same home unites us by grace.

“As I think of the seeds of hope that are being planted daily through construction and school enrichment programs, VBS, clothes banks and worship celebrations, I am reminded of something more amazing: that God has given a hope for me. The grace that transforms is not confined to a building, education system, or country. It is the grace that changes our own lives.”

Giving Faithfully Leaders Guide

Acts 4:36-37

³⁶There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”). ³⁷He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

Acts 5:1-11

¹But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; ²with his wife’s knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles’ feet. ³“Ananias,” Peter asked, “why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back a part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!” ⁵Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. ⁶The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him. ⁷After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸Peter said to her, “Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price.” And she said, “Yes, that was the price.” ⁹Then Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.” ¹⁰Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men

came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

Theme: Faithful giving begins by confronting the Ananias and Sapphira in each of us.

Before You Teach

- ▶ Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- ▶ The example of the Lairam Jesus Christ Baptist Church is suggested below as a model of unselfish and faithful giving. You may read the full story at: www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4525.
- ▶ You may read more about Leena Lavanya, whose example is suggested as a way to help adults apply this scripture, at: www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4553.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- ▶ Recall for adults the June 2004 decision by the Southern Baptist Convention to withdraw from the Baptist World Alliance, a decision that damaged fellowship, witness and goodwill but also resulted in a withdrawal of significant funds (\$425,000 in 2002-2003).

At the BWA meeting in Seoul, South Korea, later that year, a comparatively poor but spunky Baptist denomination unselfishly pledged to help rebuild BWA, committing \$400 in annual support. The Lairam Jesus Christ Baptist Church (a convention of churches), located in poverty-ridden northeast India between Bangladesh and Myanmar, joined BWA as its newest member body and immediately pledged its support to global Baptists.

The self-supporting convention has an estimated 20,000 members in churches throughout that area and employs over 160 full-time workers, including some 90 missionaries who serve in Myanmar, Bangladesh and Tibetan China.

In a written statement, the LJCBC's social mission department pledged "to serve God by rendering selfless services to the people irrespective of caste, color, sex, class, faith, etc."

The LJCBC is a model for missions in a number of ways. In 2000, it started the Lairam Christian Medical Center to address widespread health concerns and the high cost of medicine, selling medicine at a lower price and thereby serving the poor.

Thianhlun Vanlalzauva, general secretary of the Lairam convention, called the SBC decision to withdraw from the BWA a "mistake" and indicated that Southern Baptist leaders "are not thinking in terms of the global level. They may be thinking in terms of their contribution alone."

- ▶ Suggest that the \$400 annual contribution of the LJCBC might seem like a small drop in the bucket compared to the \$425,000 the larger and wealthier SBC once gave, but it represents a clear understanding and refreshing example of faithful giving. The LJCBC recognizes its global

responsibility and has pledged to do its part, holding nothing back for the sake of the gospel.

Duke McCall, a retired SBC seminary president who served as president of the BWA from 1980-85, affirms this approach. “I think that perhaps the most powerful mission organization right now is not in Richmond or even in Brazil but is in these little Baptist bodies all around the world, who are the products of missions, and now they think they are supposed to be the mission-sending body,” he said in an interview with EthicsDaily.com.

“I see the real outreach of the gospel in the world today as moving on the backs of these second-, third-, fourth- and fifth-generation Christians” who live in the parts of the world Western Christians once considered only missions fields, he said.

Suggest to adults that before we can develop this kind of missions vision and giving mentality, we have to confront the selfish and self-centered ways we live and the Western materialistic culture that so easily dictates our lifestyle choices and priorities. We also must confront the ways we deceive ourselves by thinking that our giving is always noble and sacrificial.

McCall said, “If we could get that kind of vision so that we didn’t think somehow that the gospel flows through white-skinned English-speakers better than dark-skinned nationals, it would change the effectiveness of our own missions outlet.”

► Note that in recent years, missions work has shifted from a strongly agency-based approach to a local church-based approach. Ask:

- *What effect do you think it has on individuals when they become personally involved in doing missions? What effect does it have on their churches?*
- *How do you think personal missions involvement in terms of giving time and talents affects financial support?*
- *To what specific missions causes do you think most adults tend to give their money—those they hear about from second- or third-hand reports, or those with which they have personal experience?*

Suggest that missions work does depend heavily upon the financial support of believers, but it also involves giving of time and personal skills and talents. The story of Ananias and Sapphira reminds us that simply giving lip service to missions without living our commitment to it destroys the church.

Explore the Bible

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud Acts 4:36-37. Point out that while the reference to Barnabas here is brief, he was a major figure in the early church. Supplement adults’ understanding of Barnabas with the following facts:

Barnabas, a Jew, was a native of Cyprus. The reference to him as a Levite means that he could trace his ancestry to the priestly tribe of Levi. Acts 11:24 refers to Barnabas as a good man who was full of the Holy Spirit and faith. As the book of Acts unfolds, we discover that Barnabas was instrumental in the spread of Christianity because of his gift of encouragement. His decision to sell his property and

give the proceeds to the church was apparently quite common among the early believers.

After Saul's conversion, Barnabas commended him to the apostles in Jerusalem. The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch to learn more about the conversion of Gentiles there (11:22), and he encouraged them in their faith. He and Saul later went to Antioch together and spent a year teaching there. The church at Antioch sent famine relief by Barnabas and Saul back to the church at Jerusalem (11:30).

Barnabas and Saul traveled together to Cyprus and south Galatia on a Gentile mission, which later resulted in their being questioned by a group from Judea who believed that men must be circumcised before they could become Christians. That debate eventually landed them in Jerusalem, where they met with the apostles and elders over the issue of requirements for Gentile believers.

Barnabas and Paul would later part ways on their missions tour. John Mark, who had left them during their first tour (13:13), joined Barnabas, and they went to Cyprus. Silas joined Paul, and they went to south Galatia

► Suggest that the example of Barnabas indicates that our commitment to Christ extends to our possessions and reaches into the community. Then ask:

- *How do you think we can express this kind of commitment today? What would be the same for us as selling a field and giving the proceeds to the church? Does anything we do compare?*

Columnist Frederica Mathewes-Green wrote about the feelings she experienced when, after leaving her purse on

top of her car the night before, she discovered it and its contents splattered along a rural highway. She labeled the sight of her demolished purse as "gratifying."

"It seemed a sudden opportunity to be free from all these nattering things that pin us down, that incessantly whine of their importance. A pocketbook is literal weight, and you must guard it closely or encounter catastrophe. No wonder one style of pocketbook is called a 'clutch,'" she wrote ("Ancient Faith, Modern Life," www.beliefnet.com/story/64/story_6460.html).

► Ask a volunteer to read the account of Ananias and Sapphira from Acts 5:1-11. Lead the class to discuss what happened by asking the following questions:

- *What do you think motivated Ananias and Sapphira to sell their land?*
- *Why do you think Ananias gave the apostles the impression that he had given them all the proceeds from the sale when he in fact gave them only part?*
- *What effect do you think his deceit had upon the Christian community?*
- *In what ways did Ananias sin?*
- *Does what happened to Ananias disturb you? Why?*
- *Why do you think Sapphira met with the same fate as Ananias?*
- *What effect did the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira have on the Christian community? What*

conclusions do you think they drew as a result of this experience?

► Note that verse 11 marks the first time Acts uses the word “church.” Point out the observation in the Students Guide that perhaps one reason Luke did not use the word earlier was because he was waiting for the church to confront its own falsehood. “Until deceit drops dead,” the writer said, “we won’t become the church.”

Ask adults to suggest ways we deceive ourselves, each other and God and thereby destroy the church. Then ask:

- *Is there a degree of Ananias and Sapphira in each of us?*
- *How do we squelch those tendencies?*

Note that only after the church confronted its deceit and falseness did they experience signs and wonders. Only then were they able to launch their mission into the larger world.

Apply Biblical Truth

► Close by relating the following story:

Leena Lavanya is a young Baptist woman living in India. While riding a bus one day, she met a prostitute. As she conversed with the woman, she urged her to leave that lifestyle. The woman asked her how she could make a living if she left that trade.

Leena had no immediate answer for the woman, but after discussing the situation with her family, they determined to do something to help. The family gave up eating breakfast,

saving the money they would have spent on food. After several months, they had saved enough money to buy the woman a sewing machine. They taught her to sew, thereby providing her with a new way to earn a living.

But Leena’s family did not stop there. They started a school for the children of prostitutes living in the colony where this woman lived, providing basic education and a daily meal.

In reflecting on the example of Leena and her family, Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics wrote, “Do we moderate Baptists in the United States have such compelling stories? Do we demonstrate such courage of engagement, creativity in solution and commitment to sacrifice for others? On the global scale, we are the ones of wealth, privilege and freedom. Our Baptist family abroad is often impoverished, out of cultural and political power, and under religious pressure.

“Indeed, I wonder,” Parham continued, “if the moral universe operates with an inverse proportion—the Baptists who are more economically and politically impoverished are more spiritually and morally wealthy than those of us with economic and political power.”

We have the wealth, power and freedom, Parham said. “We need the courage, creativity and commitment from Baptists abroad to change the world—even the world of a colony of prostitutes—even the economic reality of one prostitute.

“If Leena and her family can sacrifice to purchase a sewing machine, imagine what most American Baptist families could do,” he concluded.

“But what will we do?”

Obeying God Leaders Guide

Acts 5:17-29

¹⁷Then the high priest took action; he and all who were with him (that is, the sect of the Sadducees), being filled with jealousy, ¹⁸arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. ¹⁹But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought them out, and said, ²⁰“Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life.” ²¹When they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and went on with their teaching. When the high priest and those with him arrived, they called together the council and the whole body of the elders of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. ²²But when the temple police went there, they did not find them in the prison; so they returned and reported, ²³“We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” ²⁴Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were perplexed about them, wondering what might be going on. ²⁵Then someone arrived and announced, “Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!” ²⁶Then the captain went with the temple police and brought them, but without violence, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people. ²⁷When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, ²⁸saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.” ²⁹But Peter and the apostles

answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

Theme: Obedience to God’s authority instead of human authorities requires wholehearted love, trust and obedience and often carries serious and costly consequences.

Before You Teach

- ▶ Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- ▶ The online article “The Cost of Conscience” includes the story suggested as introduction for this lesson. You may wish to read it in its entirety at: www.thirdway.com/peace/story.asp?S_ID=8&S=2&P_ID=4.
- ▶ Kathy Thibodeaux’s experiences are suggested as a way to help adults apply the lessons from this scripture. You may wish to read her entire story in the article “A Ballerina’s Dream Come True” at: www.christianitytoday.com/tc/9r2/9r2048.html.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- ▶ Begin by relating the following story:

When the United States entered World War II in 1941, Richard Ross was working for the Westinghouse Corporation in Lima, Ohio, as a machinist, earning around \$120 per

week. He and the dozen or so other Mennonites the company employed at that time were conscientious objectors (COs).

He was operating a lathe on the job when he learned about the attack on Pearl Harbor. Operations stopped for a while as employees gathered to talk about what had happened. He and the other COs faced other concerns, as they wondered what might happen if Westinghouse began producing materials to be used in the war.

“I was very certain what I would do,” he wrote. “I could not, in good conscience, aid in producing any materials which would in any way be used to maim or kill. I knew I would be ready to make any sacrifice necessary to retain my strong convictions against war” (“The Cost of Conscience,” www.thirdway.com/peace/story.asp?S_ID=8&S=2&P_ID=4).

It wasn't long before Ross realized that the new steel brackets he was working on were the end brackets for electronically controlled motors. These motors would be used to turn turret guns on flying bombers.

About this same time, his employer began expecting him to work on Sundays, something he also refused to do as a matter of conscience.

His first child was only two weeks old, but Richard Ross resigned from Westinghouse, the first conscientious objector to do so. He found a job at a carburetor re-building company making just \$15 per week. Later he landed a job as an automotive machinist, making \$30 a week, still almost \$100 per week less than he had made at Westinghouse.

“I have never regretted my decision to live up to my convictions,” Ross wrote. “I believe faithfulness to God in these areas laid a faith-basis for obedience to God’s call to ministry in subsequent years.”

► Lead adults to apply Ross’s experiences to their lives by asking such questions as:

- *If you had been Richard Ross and held his beliefs, what would you have done?*
- *Have you ever deliberately refused to do something because of your personal beliefs that resulted in economic loss for you? If so, what?*
- *Did you ever feel you could not refuse to do something, even though it conflicted with your personal beliefs?*
- *How do you distinguish obedience to God from personal preference, pride and rationalization designed to get your own way?*

► Recall for the class the story of Sare, the Azerbaijani Christian who has suffered serious consequences for his decision to obey God rather than human authorities (see the Introduction in the Students Guide). Remind adults that obedience to God’s authority is challenged in every time and culture. When we choose to obey God rather than human authorities, we can expect to face serious and often costly consequences.

Explore the Bible

► Read aloud Acts 5:17-18 and point out the esteem in which the apostles who had walked with Jesus were held

by other of his followers. Contrast that with the attitude of the high priest and Sadducees. Ask:

- *Why were the high priest and Sadducees jealous of the apostles?*
- *What were they afraid of?*
- *What did they think their arrest of the apostles would do?*

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud Acts 5:19-27 and lead adults to discuss what happened by asking:

- *What did God do?*
- *Does this surprise or amaze you? Why or why not? Do you think the apostles were surprised?*
- *What were the apostles instructed to do?*
- *Why was this so dangerous?*
- *What was the reaction of the temple police and chief priests?*
- *How did the mysterious release of the apostles from prison change the way the high priest treated them? Why was this change necessary?*

Note that Stephen had been stoned not too much earlier for doing exactly what these apostles were told to do. Stephen's death opened the door for Christianity to spread. Hellenistic-Jewish Christians fled Jerusalem and Judea to escape persecution against those who shared Stephen's theological views. Some scholars believe that Stephen's stoning, which

Saul witnessed, might have paved the way for Saul's conversion.

► Read aloud Acts 5:28-29 and ask:

- *What two charges were lodged against the apostles?*
- *If you had been in their position, how would you have answered these charges? What would you have said?*
- *What were the religious leaders trying to do by bringing these charges?*
- *How did the apostles respond?*

► Remind adults that many Christians in the global community must decide on a daily basis whom they will obey: God or human authorities. Many face fines, imprisonment and even death when they refuse to compromise their beliefs and assert their determination to obey God ahead of any other authority.

Suggest that while little in our experience likely compares, we do have regular opportunities to draw a line in the sand and assert that we will live lives that reflect our commitment to Jesus and his teachings. Ask adults to suggest some examples of times when they have had to make this choice.

Apply Biblical Truth

► Close by relating the following story:

In 1982, Kathy Thibodeaux was the principal dancer in Ballet Mississippi, headed for the International Ballet

Competition, the “Olympics” of dance. As part of her program for the competition, Kathy had selected the newly released song “We Shall Behold Him.”

The ballet company’s directors believed that a song with such a strong Christian message would automatically block Kathy’s chances of winning a medal, even before she performed. They argued that the competition’s judges would be from all over the world. Many would not be Christians, and some would be Communists and atheists. They believed some judges would deduct points based solely on the song, not on her performance. Their only concern was winning the competition.

Kathy’s only concern was obeying God.

“They were thinking this was not the time or the place. [But] I really knew it was something the Lord wanted me to do,” Kathy said (“A Ballerina’s Dream Come True,” www.christianitytoday.com/tc/9r2/9r2048.html).

Kathy had begun to think seriously about faith matters several years earlier following the death of her 16-year-old sister, Amy, who was killed in a car crash when two drunken, off-duty police officers crossed into her lane. She later married Keith Thibodeaux, a drummer in a popular Christian rock band. As a child, Keith had played the role of Little Ricky on “I Love Lucy.” A few months after their marriage, she committed her life to Christ at one of Keith’s band concerts.

Her spiritual decision had raised questions in her mind about her career as a dancer. “When I became a Christian, I didn’t know whether to dance or to give it up. I felt the Lord had given me the talent, so I tried to be a witness in the secular company,” she said.

Only two years into her Christian commitment, the International Ballet Competition came to Jackson, her hometown, and she was selected to represent the city. She was also confronted with making the decision about dancing to her chosen song.

Kathy had to move through a series of other competitions and potential cuts before making it to the final competition. She faced pressure at each stage to remove her selected song from her program.

Even officials of the international competition called her and held meetings, putting her on the spot to convince her to change her mind. She didn’t budge, and “We Shall Behold Him” stayed on the program.

The international competition lasted two weeks, with dancers being cut all along the way. Kathy made it to the last round. She could win a medal. She drew the next-to-last spot on the program, which meant she would not even take the stage until after 11 p.m.

After she danced, the audience gave her the only standing ovation of the night. The next day the judges awarded her a silver medal. Her victory meant that she could dance wherever she wanted to. She had offers from New York and a number of other places, but she believed God had called her to do something else.

Four years after her inspiring performance, Kathy resigned from Ballet Mississippi to form a Christian dance company. The directors again tried to persuade her to change her mind, telling her she was making a mistake. They lured her with more money and even assured her she could dance to Christian music.

Convinced of what she must do, she launched *Ballet Magnificat!*, the first Christian dance company in the United States (www.balletmagnificat.com). Today the company draws dancers from across the United States and literally around the world. They travel year-round, half of each month, performing in churches and civic centers.

“In the dance world,” Kathy said, “you’re only accepted for your technical excellence. For outsiders, the line was ‘If it’s Christian, it must not be very good.’ We stress the technical ability with the spiritual walk. We are Christians who are good at what we do. After all, we’re here to glorify the Lord.”

Resolving Conflict Leaders Guide

Acts 6:1-7

¹Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. ²And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, ⁴while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” ⁵What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Theme: Conflict resolution is essential to a healthy church on mission.

Before You Teach

► Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

► The EthicsDaily.com article “BWA Speaker Tells about Baptist Reconciliation in South Africa” includes additional information you may find helpful as you introduce the lesson. You can read it at: www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4519.

► The following articles from EthicsDaily.com include practical suggestions for resolving conflict:

“Ingredients for Peace” (www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4435).

“Ingredients for Peace, Part 2” (www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4540).

► The online article “Digging Deeper” includes illustrations suggested for helping adults apply the truths of this lesson. You may wish to read the entire article at: www.thirdway.com/aw/?AID=167&Submit=Go.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

► Begin by stating this African proverb: When a bird builds its nest, it uses the feathers of other birds.

Ask adults to suggest possible meanings. Then provide the following illustration:

Years of apartheid in South Africa resulted in misunderstanding, tension and conflict among black and white Baptists. According to Terry Rae, former general secretary of the predominately white Baptist Union of South Africa, “White leadership had not worked through the issues of being the ‘favored’ culture ... nor had we begun to under-

stand the effects of the apartheid system on our black brothers and sisters.”

Although slavery did not greatly affect South Africa, it had a tremendous impact on the attitudes of Europeans, who Rae said viewed blacks as inferior. This contributed to the oppression of the people of Africa.

“The apartheid system ... went furthest in oppressing and dehumanizing the people of Africa,” Ray said. “The whole legal system was based on the assumption that Europeans were superior to Africans, and this belief was bred into the lives and behavior of the people of South Africa.”

Eventually the black and white Baptist bodies began meeting to work through their differences, beginning in 1991, but they didn’t experience a breakthrough until 1996 when 10 leaders from each group attended a prayer retreat. The white Baptist Union later that year adopted a resolution acknowledging white Baptists’ “sins of commission and omission.”

Reconciliation conferences followed in 1996 and 1997, and in May 1998 leaders from both bodies met. At that meeting, the 180 participants were divided into groups of 20. Each group was instructed to write grievances on a flipchart, and at the end of that day, groups read aloud their lists. The charts were then displayed on the wall of the large hall where they met.

The next day, the participants were seated with their respective union/convention on opposite sides of the room. The facilitator asked who would like to begin the process of repentance. “Twenty minutes of tense silence followed,” Rae recalled.

Then, a black delegate crossed the aisle to a white delegate, confessed his criticism of the other person and asked for forgiveness. After they embraced, other delegates quickly followed, confessing and repenting, seeking and granting forgiveness. This continued for five hours, without a break.

At the end of that day, everyone was exhausted and sat silently. Then a Xhosa woman, a member of the black Baptist Convention, went to the wall, took down a page of the grievances and placed it on the communion table. Other delegates soon followed her example, and another woman began placing the sheets under the table.

Leaders of both black and white Baptist conventions stood and declared that the issues now under the table would not be resurrected again.

Meeting again in 1999, the two groups acknowledged that while the white Baptist Union emphasized evangelism and missions, and the black Baptist Convention emphasized social action and justice, each should learn from the other.

Three other Baptist bodies have since joined the unity talks, and all five bodies now form the South African Baptist Alliance. They work together to facilitate unity, address national issues related to justice and cooperate in ministries.

► Ask adults to identify the steps the two groups used in resolving their conflict. Stress the importance of conflict resolution in healthy churches serious about missions.

Acknowledge that while scripture characterized the Christian church in the early chapters of Acts as being “of one heart and soul,” with “not a needy person among them”

(4:32, 34), that idealized state was not permanent. Problems and conflict soon developed. The reality is that conflict and tension have, from the beginning, been easy to find in the church.

Note that the early church faced its conflict and took steps to resolve it, allowing it to stay focused on its mission and its desire to spread the gospel message farther into the known world. Their example provides the church today with concrete tools to use in managing and resolving conflict and moving ahead on mission.

Explore the Bible

► Read aloud Acts 6:1; then ask:

- *What two major factors resulted in the church’s internal tension and conflict?*
- *Who were the Hellenists?*
- *What was their role in the early church?*

Point out that the distinction between the Hellenists and Hebrews was not ethnic. Both were Jews. Their differences were linguistic, as the Hellenists were Greek-speaking. Then ask:

- *Why had so many Greek-speaking Jews settled in Jerusalem?*

Remind adults of the plight of widows at that time, using information in the Students Guide. Point out that the church accepted that it was their responsibility to take care of widows and orphans.

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud Acts 6:2-7 and lead adults to discuss the steps the twelve took in identifying and resolving the conflict. Ask:

- *What seems to be Luke's primary concern in reporting this incident?*
- *Who identified the problem, and how did they address it?*
- *Who was involved in the meeting to discuss the problem?*
- *What solution did the apostles propose? What was their reasoning?*
- *What criteria did the apostles identify as being important for the seven new leaders they wanted the church to select?*
- *What was the result of the apostle's proposal?*
- *What is significant about the identity of the seven who were selected?*
- *What did the apostles do to signify the new leadership roles of the seven?*
- *Was the conflict resolved? How do you know?*

Point out that scripture indicates both Stephen and Philip were involved in preaching, not waiting on tables, so apparently the crisis in the church was resolved.

► Ask adults to identify the lessons we can learn from the early church about resolving conflicts in the Christian com-

munity. Note the suggestions in the Students Guide. Then ask:

- *What conflicts exist in the church today that affect how we do missions?*
- *What must we do to resolve these conflicts?*
- *What will happen to the cause of missions if we do not resolve them?*

Apply Biblical Truth

► Columnist Melodie Davis writes about a friend's fond childhood memories of going blueberry picking in Massachusetts with her mother and siblings (see "Digging Deeper," www.thirdway.com/aw/?AID=167&Submit=Go).

The children tied cans around their necks to hold the berries they picked, leaving both hands free for picking. Often more berries ended up in their mouths than in the cans, as evidenced by their blue-stained lips and faces.

Invariably, the friend recalls, her mother would come along behind the children and find more berries, even though the children were sure they had found them all. "You have to dig deeper," the mother would say.

Years later, Davis's friend led her own children in the same blueberry picking routine. This time, however, it was she who would come along behind her sons and remind them to dig deeper so that they would find more berries.

It's a lesson we can apply on various levels. "We should all be so wise," Davis writes. "How often would it pay to dig just a little deeper, try harder, work a little harder."

“I often wish people dug deeper in their conversations. When people have the most conflict or disagreement, it is often because they have not taken the time to dig beneath the surface issues and really listen.”

That, says Davis, is the secret to successful conflict resolution. “The genius of this method of resolving differences and conflict is that it makes a setting for conflicting sides to both air their problems in complete detail, and also listen completely to the other side. Usually when we take the time to truly listen, or even in talking through to find our own deep feelings ourselves, new ideas for how to resolve a conflict or at least compromise and agree to disagree will emerge.”

► Suggest that our unwillingness to dig deeper into issues means that problems needing to come to the surface instead stay buried and unresolved. Because they are still present, just under the surface, they continue to make their presence known and prevent us from moving ahead.

The early church provides a model for digging deeper, bringing troubling issues into the open, allowing all sides opportunities to speak and listen. Because they worked through their conflict in this way, they were able to continue the work of the church and move into the world with the gospel message.

Breaking Barriers Leaders Guide

Acts 8:26-38

²⁶Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.)

²⁷So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” ³⁰So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

³²Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. ³³In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.”

³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.

Theme: Cultural, racial, linguistic, economic and political issues often form barriers that effective missions work must overcome.

Before You Teach

► Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

► Ask class members who have seen the movie “Remember the Titans” to summarize its story line.

Remind the class that the movie is based on the true story resulting from the integration of an all-black school with an all-white school in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1971. In an effort to stem racial unrest, a young black man, Herman Boone (portrayed in the movie by Denzel Washington), was hired as head coach of the T.C. Williams High Titans football team over Bill Yoast, a white man who had several years of seniority and a loyal community following.

The movie chronicles the struggles of the coaches and players as they work to break down barriers and build bridges of understanding and trust. The task is difficult and full of potential landmines. But because the coaches value each member of the team, help team members get to know one another, treat everyone with respect and model and teach tolerance, their differences begin to fade.

The coaches and players learn to understand each other when they get to know each other as individuals, not as racial stereotypes. When they view each other in personal ways and establish common and level ground, they begin to overcome racial barriers that have long separated them. On a certain level, both white and black team members experience a sort of conversion in terms of their opinions of each other.

The team’s success comes in part because they eventually recognize that their goal is greater than winning or being in first place. It involves establishing a level playing field for all of the players.

► Connect this example to the situations of many people who are preoccupied with cultural, racial, linguistic, economic, political and other concerns that prevent them from a clear understanding of the message of the Bible.

Suggest that in terms of understanding what the Bible says, the “playing field” is not level for everyone because of these barriers. Note that just as the racially divided members of the Titans football team could see and understand each other only when they confronted one another face to face, God often uses a human face, guided by the Holy Spirit, to bring spiritual enlightenment and understanding in cultural contexts where barriers tend to hinder and hide it.

► Call attention to and summarize the story of the two women from the Introduction in the Students Guide. Note its similarities to the story of the Ethiopian in Acts 8:26-28.

Explore the Bible

► Introduce the scripture by noting that it is the first recorded instance of the conversion of a non-Jewish person

to Christianity and marks the earliest efforts of Jesus' disciples to move beyond Jerusalem and into "all Judea and Samaria."

The fact that this convert was African and one who could never become a Jewish proselyte because of his physical deformity makes his conversion even more significant. This account continues Luke's theme that the gospel of Jesus welcomes those who are considered outcasts. It also fulfills Isaiah's prophecy in 56:1-5 about eunuchs.

Note that in Hebrew scripture, Ethiopia referred to any remote area (see Am 9:7), but by the first century, it designated the area directly south of Egypt. To many people in that day, it was, because of its southernmost location, "the end of the earth."

"Ethiopian" also referred to people with dark or black skin.

"Eunuch" literally means a male who has been castrated. Royal households regularly employed such men. Because the man in Acts 8 is referred to as a eunuch five times, there is little doubt that he had endured this physical procedure. As such, he could never fully convert to Judaism, yet he was so interested in it and in studying Isaiah that he had traveled to Jerusalem.

► Ask class members to select one of the two main characters in this story, Philip or the Ethiopian, and try to identify as closely as possible with him. Encourage them to divide themselves as equally as possible between the two characters for the sake of balanced discussion.

Call attention to the clearly marked stages in the progression of this story: preparation (vv 26-29); witness (vv 30-35) and commitment (vv 36-38).

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Acts 8:26-29 and supplement information about Philip by offering these facts:

- Philip the evangelist (the man in this story) was different from Philip the apostle. The latter we know only from a reference in John's Gospel.
- Philip the evangelist was one of seven Hellenist leaders who served the church in Jerusalem (Acts 6). After Stephen was martyred, he left Jerusalem and went to Samaria, where he began a successful mission. The apostles in Jerusalem later sanctioned this work (8:14).
- About 20 years after the beginning of the mission to the Gentiles, Paul stayed in Philip's home in Caesarea (21:8) and talked with Philip and his four daughters about the end of the first phase of missionary work. Philip's daughters had the gift of prophecy, according to scripture.
- According to biblical accounts, Philip the evangelist was responsible for significant missionary achievements while undergoing difficulties and persecution.

► Ask adults who identified with Philip to respond to the following questions:

- *What barriers did Philip initially have to overcome simply to make his later witness possible?*
- *What was unusual about what God's Spirit had asked Philip to do?*
- *What did Philip have in common with the man he encountered? In what ways were the two men different?*

► Read aloud Acts 8:30-35. Then ask adults who identified with the Ethiopian to respond to these questions:

- *What do you think the Ethiopian understood from what he was reading? What affect did the words have on him?*
- *What barriers did the Ethiopian have to overcome in order to understand the scripture's message?*
- *What was significant about the particular scripture the Ethiopian man was reading?*

► Ask a volunteer to read the remaining verses in the account. Note the immediate and enthusiastic response of the Ethiopian man. Ask:

- *What do you think Philip said that helped the man understand what he was reading? In what ways could he have helped the man overcome the barriers that blocked his understanding to the point that he could explain God's salvation to him and lead him to accept it?*

Point out that verse 37 is a later addition to this account and gives us a little more insight into what happened. Point out that scripture gives us very little information about what Philip specifically said to the man to help him in his understanding. Verse 35 simply indicates that Philip "proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus," starting with the scripture that he had been reading.

Suggest that the theme of this passage and of the entire chapter is that everyone—all sorts of people, including those who are otherwise considered outcasts—is welcomed into God's kingdom when they repent from their sins and commit to follow Jesus.

Apply Biblical Truth

► Remind adults that our Western mindset and orientation and our familiarity with and access to scripture generally prevent us from realizing the barriers people of other cultures face as they try to understand the Bible's message. Effective missions work recognizes that these barriers exist and works creatively over and around these barriers while still respecting cultural differences.

► Parush Parushev is a Bulgarian Baptist now living in Prague, Czech Republic, where he is academic dean and director of applied theology at the International Baptist Theological Seminary. He offers the following story, in his own words, as a way for you to help your class further understand and apply the truths of this scripture:

In the dark years of suppression of any dissent from the official Communist ideology, a believer faithful to Christ's calling and led by the Spirit continued the pioneering work of the early Bulgarian Baptists in reaching the Roma community on the Balkans. Even in the rather tolerant Bulgarian society these were set aside as outcasts. Following in the steps of Philip and in dramatic circumstances endangering his own life, this faithful Christian shared the good news of Christ, which changed the life of an inveterate Roma criminal.

In early 1990s in Bulgaria, as in the rest of the Communist block countries, the barriers of the former Communist political power and ideological indoctrination were rapidly fragmenting. Yet the deeply seated ethnic prejudices and nationalistic feelings had much deeper roots.

In a small country town, a former Communist Party secretary, currently the mayor, was interrogated by culturally pro-Orthodox and still governmentally controlled media. He was

asked why he was giving permission to the town's Roma minority to buy a lucrative piece of property for a "sect," as they called the Baptist community, to build a church and a social work center.

During the interview, the pastor of the Roma Baptist community acquiring the property stood next to the mayor. The mayor's response was very simple: "If a religion can transform a wretched man and a drunkard like this bandit," he said, pointing to the pastor of the church, "and establish him as a respected leader of an exemplar community for the town, I do not care whether they are a sect or not; I trust them and will do for them whatever they want!"

The mayor was referring to the dramatic conversion story of one of the city's most notorious criminals who was reached and transformed by a small Baptist community and was able, through his own witness of a transformed life, to become one of the most appreciated leaders among the Romas in the Balkans, a preacher and a Roma radio evangelist for the entire Balkan region.

As the eunuch in the story of Acts, this man regained his dignity and worth by the grace of God and the power of the Spirit in the community's witness, breaking down the confines of the marginalization, obscurity and the undignifying poverty that was beyond the reach of the social and political arrangements of the society.

The story of such transformation is as ancient as the story of the Kingdom vision of Isaiah the prophet and Jesus the Messiah. It always works where the integrity of the personal life with Christ, the presence of the light of God, in the witness and the social involvement of the community, is made relevant to the society blinded by cultural, racial, linguistic, economic or political barriers.

Taking Risks Leaders Guide

Acts 9:10-19

¹⁰Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." ¹¹The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, ¹²and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." ¹³But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; ¹⁴and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name." ¹⁵But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; ¹⁶I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." ¹⁷So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." ¹⁸And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Theme: Emotional, cultural, social and sometimes even physical risks accompany missions work.

Before You Teach

► Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

► Review the list of risky situations and encounters in the first step, below. Add additional risks you can think of.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

► Before adults arrive, list the following potentially risky situations and encounters on a board or chart. Include others you have encountered or can envision:

- Establishing a friendship with a person recently released from prison
- Moving your young family into the inner city of a major US metropolitan area
- Becoming a sponsor for a refugee family from a country plagued by famine and ethnic violence
- Working in a hospice ministry with terminally ill patients
- Establishing a friendship with a Muslim coworker
- Becoming involved in the lives of families living in extreme poverty in a rural area
- Helping a woman who has left an abusive marriage

- Becoming a caregiver to an Alzheimer's patient
- Becoming friends with a homeless man
- Leading a sports camp for inner-city youth
- Teaching English as a second language
- Repairing homes in a neighborhood known for drug deals
- Moving to a third-world country to establish a relief ministry
- Teaching job skills to former substance abusers
- Volunteering in a ministry to people with AIDS
- Tutoring former gang members who want to earn their GED

► After adults arrive, call attention to the list of situations on the chart or board and ask them to suggest what these situations have in common.

Ask if anyone has been involved in one of the situations or in something similar, and allow them to describe the circumstances, including the outcomes and results.

Next, ask adults to select the five situations they believe are riskiest, followed by the five they believe are the least risky. Allow for adequate debate and discussion. Place the number ranking beside each situation.

► Suggest that we cannot fulfill our callings in missions without joining with others along the way. Sometimes we will be called to minister to them; other times, we will be

called to minister alongside them. In either case, we often find that emotional, social, cultural and even physical risks accompany the call to minister. When we fail to accept the challenge and encounter possible risks, we also eliminate the potential rewards that come with obedience to God's call.

Ananias provides us with a healthy model for encountering and responding to the risks of obedient faith.

Explore the Bible

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud Acts 9:10-14. Note that this Ananias is a different man from the one in Acts 5:1-11 who held back money from the sale of his property and lied to the apostles about it.

Remind adults that visions were not unusual at that time, and people paid careful attention to visions they and others had. Note that Ananias seems to have no doubt that it is the Lord speaking to him in his vision. Also point out that Saul too had a vision from the Lord.

Lead adults to discuss what God expected from Ananias by asking such questions as:

- *What was Ananias's reaction to the divine directive?*
- *Why was the Lord's request a difficult one for Ananias? What risks did he face, and what were the natures of those risks?*
- *Do you think God is bothered when we question divine plans or hesitate to follow through on divine directives?*

- *How did Ananias know that it was indeed the Lord directing him to take this risky step?*
- *How do we distinguish between God's Spirit directing us and something else that resembles it?*
- *What do you think convinced Ananias that he was indeed supposed to seek out Saul, known for persecuting Christians?*
- *Do you think that God arranges divine appointments today? Have there been occasions when you felt an encounter with someone was God-appointed?*

Suggest that often our problem in doing God's will is not that we do not know what it is; instead, we are afraid of where our obedience might take us and what God might ask us to do. Responding obediently to God's will does often include risk of some kind, as Ananias discovered. Yet obedience in the face of such risk results in deeper faith.

► Read aloud Acts 9:15-18. Note that God was patient with Ananias and reassured him that what he had been asked to do was part of the divine plan. Saul, too, God told Ananias, was an important part of that plan. Convinced, Ananias left the security of the known for the uncertainty of the unknown. He went to the house where Saul was staying and touched him, resulting in Saul's sight being restored.

Ask:

- *Do you think all of Ananias's questions were answered before he left to find Saul?*

- *What might have happened if Ananias had refused to obey God's direction and go to Saul?*
- *How might the Christian church have been affected if Ananias had not been obedient to what he understood from God?*
- *With whom do you most closely identify in this story, Ananias or Saul?*
- *If we are like Ananias, who are the people who are like Saul to us? Who are the people to whom God is calling us to minister but from whom we tend to back away?*
- *What might happen to these people if we fail to be obedient to seek them out and minister to them?*
- *What might happen to the Christian church if we ignore them or assume that someone else will seek them out?*

Apply Biblical Truth

► Lead adults to consider ministry initiatives in which they can become involved and the associated risks by relating the following examples.

Alabama CBF and the people of Perry County, Alabama, have formed a rural poverty initiative called Sowing Seeds of Hope. Perry County is one of the nation's poorest. Over half of its children live in poverty, and its unemployment rate exceeds 10 percent. Alabama Baptists view Perry County as the perfect place to demonstrate two important faith elements: ecumenical ministries with black and white

Christian brothers and sisters and a commitment to social justice.

"We envision no quick fix and no paternalistic relationship," says Dr. Wayne Flint, distinguished university professor at Auburn University, member of the Auburn First Baptist Church and progenitor of the Perry County concept for missions and ministry.

"We contemplate an engagement of at least a quarter-century, not of a few months. We proclaim a vision longer than the span of our own lives. And we act only as enablers, responding to what the people of Perry County themselves decide are the best ways to provide health care, better education, job skills, economic development, and adequate housing. All our efforts will be collaborative. We will work *with* the people of Perry County, not *at* them or *for* them or *toward* them."

Flint notes that many efforts during the past century have attempted to reduce or even eliminate poverty, all with only marginal effect. "So what we propose is a faith-based initiative that begins with the spiritual questions that energize our Christianity. Who are the poor and what is our responsibility toward them? How can we transcend the materialism of our age for a fresh vision of God's creation? How can people be empowered to take care of their own physical needs? Can Christianity surmount barriers of race and class on behalf of a higher human ideal? Can we change the political and economic structures that enslave the poor as effectively as we seek to introduce them to new life in Christ? Can we listen to and learn from the poor as patiently as we talk to and teach them?"

► Suggest the following as a ministry of an entirely different nature but with inherent risks as well.

South Carolina CBF has established a partnership with Baptists in Belgium. Following a trip there to determine ways to strengthen that relationship, Harry Rowland, pastor of The Baptist Church at Beaufort, said, “Belgium churches and Belgium Christians live in a difficult climate. Though there is affluence in Belgium and wonderful cathedrals that should remind the inhabitants that they live in the presence of God, the vast majority has lost respect for the church and doubt its relevance.”

“At best,” Rowland said, most Belgians see church “as a cultural relic which is nice to have around for quaint family rituals such as christenings, weddings, and funerals. Some of this is attributed to backlash toward the opulent wealth of Catholic church as well as the state church mentality that has robbed many of taking any personal responsibility for things spiritual. This is the landscape that the 29 Belgium Baptist churches face.”

What the churches in Belgium really need, Rowland said, is “encouragement, modeling of discipleship issues, and leadership training. As far a reciprocal relationship, the Belgium pastors and churches can help us gain a world-view of what can happen in our culture if we are not careful. Less than 100 years ago, 98 percent of the Dutch attended church regularly and within two generations this percentage is under 10 percent. This is a warning we need to hear. They are also very open and free in worship and culturally and racially diverse in their churches. This was like church ought to be. They do meet God in worship and do love and care for each other.”

► Remind adults that those who join God in the divine mission discover both risk and reward. Sometimes God calls people to leave everything familiar—home, family, friends—in order to obey the call. At other times our obedi-

ence results in risks of a different nature as a result of relationships God asks us to form with people who are different from us.

Just as Saul had to become blind before he could clearly see, we too must become aware of our blindness toward those we tend to overlook but to whom God calls us to minister.

Witnessing to All Leaders Guide

Acts 10:34-43

³⁴Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. ³⁷That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴²He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Theme: Effective witnesses look beyond appearances.

Before You Teach

► Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

► Ask adults who have seen the 2001 movie “Shrek” to describe the relationship between Shrek and Donkey. Supplement and focus discussion by including the following summary:

“Shrek” is a large, very unattractive ogre who becomes friends with a talking donkey (voiced by Eddie Murphy). Shrek falls in love with a princess and rescues her from a castle. The prince orders him to escort the princess back to the village, so he and Donkey begin that journey. They decide to camp out along the way, because the trip is quite long.

As they sit around a campfire, Donkey talks to Shrek about what life will be like once they return to Shrek’s home, a swamp. Donkey refers to it as “our” swamp.

Shrek challenges Donkey by saying: “There’s no our. There’s just me and my swamp, and the first thing I’m going to do is build a ten-foot wall around my land.”

Donkey is genuinely surprised by Shrek’s reaction. He thought they had developed such a friendship that they would share both lives and possessions once their journey was over. The two argue, and Donkey tells Shrek that he thinks the whole wall idea is just a way to keep somebody out, and asks, “Who are you trying to keep out? Just tell me that, okay?”

Shrek replies, “Everyone! Okay?”

“Hey, what’s your problem, Shrek?” Donkey asks. “What you got against the whole world, anyway?”

Shrek answers that he is not the one with the problem. “It’s the whole world that seems to have a problem with me,” he says. “People take one look at me and go ‘Ahhh! Help! Run! It’s a big, stupid, ugly ogre!’ They judge me before they even know me. That’s why I’m better off alone.”

Donkey reassures Shrek by saying, “You know what? When we first met, I didn’t think you were just a big, stupid, ugly ogre.”

Shrek realizes what Donkey says is true and for the first time, he knows that someone has looked beyond his outward appearance and has accepted him.

► Suggest that we often make judgments based on people’s appearance and use those judgments to determine who is worthy of our notice, our caring and our witness. It seems that it is quite easy for us to completely pass by and ignore some people. Point out the writer’s example from the Introduction in the Students Guide of the response of the two pastors to the homeless man who needed help. Then ask:

- *What was different between the responses of the two pastors?*
- *Was one more effective than the other? Why or why not?*
- *What did each fail to do?*

Note that no real and effective witness occurs apart from a caring relationship that looks beyond appearances. Peter’s encounter with Cornelius provides us with some important reminders.

Explore the Bible

► Set the stage for the encounter between Peter and Cornelius by recalling for adults what happened prior to it. Include the following facts from Acts 10:

- Cornelius was a Roman centurion in the “Italian Cohort” (v 1), the first person with Roman authority named in the book of Acts.
- Scripture describes Cornelius as a “devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God” (v 2). Cornelius’s lifestyle demonstrated that he was in a position to be responsive to God’s word and open to God’s salvation.
- God gave Cornelius a vision that would ultimately result in his conversion. *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary* notes that the “missionary function of visions in Acts is to locate a person in the right place at the right time in order to receive God’s beneficence.” Cornelius was instructed to “send men to Joppa” for a man named Peter who was staying at the home of a man named Simon, a tanner.
- Luke at this point records another “double vision.” (Earlier both Saul and Ananias had separate visions about the same thing.) In addition to Cornelius having a vision, Peter had a vision that eventually led him to the realization that God shows no partiality

and that Gentiles are also recipients of God's offer of salvation.

► Read aloud Acts 10:34-38 and lead adults to discuss what happened in light of the background you provided. Ask such questions as:

- *What had to happen before Peter could speak to Cornelius and Cornelius would be in a position to understand him?*
- *How is what happened in the case of Cornelius different from our usual understanding of witnessing?*
- *Who was the first to get involved in Cornelius's ultimate conversion?*
- *What preconceived ideas did Peter have about Cornelius before his vision?*
- *How did Peter's vision change his openness to Cornelius?*
- *How did Peter tailor his witness to Cornelius?*

Suggest that for Peter, ethnicity was a face-value judgment that impeded his witness, before his vision. Then ask:

- *What face-value judgments impede our witness today? What judgments about people do we make based on appearances that cause us to deem them unworthy of our witness?*
- *What should we consider as we tailor our witness to those with whom we have established relationships?*

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud Acts 10:39-43. Note the systematic approach of Peter's explanation to Cornelius. Beginning with Jesus' baptism, he recounted the facts of Jesus' life, death, crucifixion, burial and resurrection. His authority to speak to these facts arose from his being a firsthand witness to them. He had experienced Jesus personally and now shared that experience with others.

Then ask:

- *What is significant about the way Peter concluded his message to Cornelius?*
- *How does Peter's witness to Cornelius compare to anything you have ever experienced?*
- *Are we called to witness directly to everyone? Why or why not?*
- *What determines who receives a direct witness from us?*
- *Do you believe that God leads us to witness directly to particular people?*
- *Does God sometimes ask that we go out of our way to witness to someone, or witness to someone who does not fit our ideas of a "worthy witness"?*
- *Do you think that the same approach in witnessing is effective for every person? Why or why not?*
- *In what ways other than directly can we effectively witness to people?*

► Note the four important points at the conclusion of the Students Guide and lead adults to elaborate on them and apply them to situations they encounter:

- God leads the way.
- Peter cared enough to go out of his way.
- Peter cared enough to know what Cornelius already knew.
- Peter's witness included both his belief and a call to faith.

Apply Biblical Truth

► Recall for adults the 2001 movie "Legally Blonde" and ask them if they can identify the unusual twist in this movie, given the discussion about looking beyond appearances.

In the movie, the character Elle Woods (played by Reese Witherspoon) lives with the "dumb blonde" stereotype. Although she has earned straight As in her field of fashion marketing, her boyfriend does not think that such a field requires the mental ability of other college majors. He determines that she is not smart enough to be his wife, as he has political aspirations and is headed to Harvard Law School.

Elle proves her boyfriend wrong and is also accepted into Harvard, where she excels, although she continues to live with the stereotypes of others.

Movie reviewers Hal Conklin and Denny Wayman call this "the inverted story of prejudice," because normally in such stories, it is the privileged people who make life more

difficult for those less fortunate. In this case, they say, "it is the person of privilege who is judged before anyone really understands who she is."

The kind of assumptions people make about Elle, Conklin and Wayman say, "is usually at the core of prejudices. Rather than accepting the uniqueness of others and considering the skills their success has required, we tend to measure them by the superficial standards of our own experiences. ... The ability to know and accept one's self so completely that we can come to know and accept others as they really are is seldom achieved without help.

"If prejudice is ever to be defeated," they conclude, "it will come not from sensitivity training and laws against hate crimes, but from people lovingly accepting themselves and others" (www.cinemainfocus.com/legallyblonde.htm).

► Suggest to adults that it is not always the people on life's margins about whom we make assumptions and have preconceived ideas and whom we determine to be unworthy of our witness. Sometimes it is those who appear to "have everything." We may often be guilty of showing partiality not based on what a person doesn't have but on what a person has. We presume that a person of means and wealth is not interested in our witness.

Challenge adults above all to respond to God's leadership in developing genuine relationships with others that will allow them to offer a witness within a context of caring and concern.

Moving Beyond the Old Ways Leaders Guide

Acts 11:1-18

¹Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. ²So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, ³saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” ⁴Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, ⁵“I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. ⁶As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸But I replied, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ ⁹But a second time the voice answered from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’ ¹⁰This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. ¹¹At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. ¹²The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; ¹⁴he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.’ ¹⁵And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the

beginning. ¹⁶And I remembered the word of Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” ¹⁸When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

Theme: The presence of God’s Spirit in the lives of believers introduces new and creative ways to express the Christian faith in worship, ministry and witness.

Before You Teach

- ▶ Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- ▶ Prepare scripture assignment cards as indicated below. If adults prefer to work individually, duplicate enough cards so that each person can have one.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

- ▶ Begin by asking:
 - *To what degree does tradition dictate not only what we do, but how we do it?*

Allow adults to dialogue and debate the question. Guide them to address the question in general, but also specifically as it relates to the church.

► Next, ask adults to recall the now-classic 1971 film “Fiddler on the Roof,” based on the beloved Broadway musical. Lead them to reconstruct some of the film’s basic themes, using the following information to help guide discussion:

The story takes place around 1910 in the small Ukrainian village of Anatevka. The people live in uncertainty and unrest. Jews are being driven from their homes in large numbers; World War I is approaching.

One of the story’s major themes is how old traditions are dissolving due to changes in culture brought about by industrialization and mechanization. The film opens with a joyful musical number called “Traditions,” and the title of the film itself refers to how tradition is a buffer and support against the precarious nature of life. Traditions help the people understand their place in their families, the village and in the larger society.

A specific tradition highlighted and celebrated in the film is the way Jews have always married: a matchmaker selects a wife for a man; the woman’s father approves the match, and the two are married.

The main character, Tevye, and his wife Golde were married that way, and that’s the way he believes his five daughters should be married. However, his daughter Tzeitel has other ideas and rejects her father’s selection of a mate. Instead of marrying the wealthy butcher Lazar Wolf, she wants to marry her childhood sweetheart, Motel, who is a poor tailor. Only reluctantly does Tevye go along with her choice.

Then his second daughter, Hodel, decides to marry a young revolutionary named Perchik. Another daughter, Chava, falls in love with Fyedka, who is not even Jewish. Tevye simply cannot accept this decision and warns of grave consequences if Chava and Fyedka marry.

Each daughter’s decision, it seems, reflects another departure from tradition, which is no small thing in Jewish life. While at one point Tevye recognizes that “the old ways were once new,” he can compromise only so far when it comes to tradition. Some things are simply non-negotiable.

► Apply these ideas to practices within the Christian faith. Remind adults of God’s requirements with the Israelites to hold annual festivals—traditions—to commemorate and remember God’s provisions of food, protection and guidance. Note that these traditions helped the people focus on God, and they offered older members of the community ways to teach the younger members. Jewish Christians in the early church did not immediately do away with all of their historical and meaningful traditions upon their conversion.

Point out, however, that certain of these traditions, though they held meaning for the Jews, proved difficult and problematic for Gentiles. In a similar way, churches today often become accustomed to doing things a certain way even though they are no longer effective. Sometimes patterns become traditions that we refuse to let go of, even though they create more problems than they solve.

Acknowledge that deviating from established church traditions can be a source of great tension and debate. Ask:

- *How do we know when to let go of something important that no longer seems to be relevant?*
- *What factors should we consider when we are trying to decide whether to change long-held practices?*
- *How effective do you think the Christian church has been in moving beyond the old ways?*

Note that the early church, composed first of Jewish believers, struggled with and resolved these issues as they learned to welcome Gentile believers into the Christian community. Their example can provide us with some important insights into what we can expect when we try to move beyond the old ways.

Explore the Bible

► Begin by asking adults to characterize the apostle Peter. Pool their collective knowledge and try to paint an honest verbal portrait of the man. Use the following information to help.

- Peter's name appears first each time scripture records the listing of apostles (Matt 10:2; Mk 3:16; Lk 6:14; Acts 1:13). This probably indicates to some degree his status within that group.
- He was one of Jesus' close inner circle, along with James and John (Mk 5:37; 9:2; 13:3; 14:33).
- He often served as a spokesperson for the other apostles. Some biblical accounts are less than flattering of him, portraying him as impulsive and sometimes prone to speak before thinking.

- The first half of Acts reveals him as a leader in the early church.
- His major shift in thinking concerning the conversion of Gentiles was a huge step forward in the early church. Had Peter not come to the conclusions he did about salvation being offered to Gentiles, the church likely would not have extended its mission at that time. His ability to listen carefully, think logically and articulate passionately helped others come to the same conclusions he had reached.

► Lead adults to examine Acts 11:1-16 in detail, a few verses at a time. Ahead of time, prepare cards on which you have printed the assignments below.

Distribute assignment cards either to individuals or small groups, depending upon the preferences of your class, and allow them time to consider answers to the questions after reading the scripture.

Assignment 1

Read Acts 11:1-3 and suggest answers to these questions:

- *What were the apostles and other believers in Jerusalem most concerned about, and why?*
- *What were their concerns based upon?*
- *What did they fear would happen?*

Assignment 2

Read Acts 11:4-10 and suggest answers to these questions:

- *Why do you think Luke includes the story of Peter's vision and Cornelius's conversion twice (see also Acts 10)?*
- *How did Peter respond to the questions and concerns of those in Jerusalem?*
- *In what ways was this dialogue healthy?*

Assignment 3

Read Acts 11:11-16 and suggest answers to these questions:

- *What did God's Spirit instruct Peter to do?*
 - *Why do you think Peter took six other men along with him?*
 - *What happened as a result of the encounter between Peter and Cornelius?*
- After several minutes, ask individuals or small groups to review their assigned scripture and answers to their questions. Note the following about Peter's response:
- He offered step-by-step, reasoned explanation. He did not seem to be offended by the group's questions or concerns.
 - He was careful to provide enough details that his listeners were convinced his vision was from God.
 - He addressed their concerns about his potential violation of Jewish law and noted that he, too, had had these same concerns.

- He was open to the leadership of God's Spirit and was ready to go when the Spirit instructed him to go.

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud Acts 11:17 and note Peter's conclusion. Gentiles, he discovered, had received the Holy Spirit just as he and the other believers had. Peter was convinced that God intended salvation for everyone. He also understood that if he and the other Jewish Christians imposed additional requirements for salvation upon Gentiles, they would be interfering with God's plan. It was not up to them to decide who could be saved and how. The one requirement for salvation is repentance.

► Read aloud Acts 11:18 and note the reaction of those to whom Peter had spoken. First, they were silent, indicating that not only had he answered all of their questions and concerns, but also that they were carefully considering everything he had said. Then, "they praised God." They reached the same conclusions as had Peter. Salvation was God's gift to everyone.

Point out that the Jewish Christians in the early church struggled with and determined which long-held traditions fit into their new community of faith. Those that were problematic to Gentile Christians became problematic for them as well, because they threatened to disrupt community and fellowship. Their willingness to discuss the problem and change their thinking resulted in new opportunities for growth.

Apply Biblical Truth

► Recall for adults the 2003 family film "Whale Rider," which delves deeply into New Zealand's Maori traditions. The film's protagonist, Pai, played by rising star Keisha

Castle-Hughes, emerges as an intelligent and brave figure in her tribe.

The tribal leader, Koro, must find a young man to whom to pass along his leadership, since his own two sons are unfit. He wants to find a young man who will embrace and continue the long-held traditions. Pai fits the bill in terms of displaying all the skills Koro seeks, but the tribe looks only to men for leadership, and Koro refuses to consider her for the role. Koro's wife, Nanny Flowers, works behind his back to hone Pai's virtues and help develop her into a leader, waiting until the right time for Pai to claim her place in the tribe's history.

► Note that like Koro in "Whale Rider" and the first-century Christians, we too struggle with which traditions to keep and which to let go of. Doing missions effectively today involves recognizing that for the sake of the greater good, we must move beyond some of the old ways our traditions represent.

Close by asking adults to consider these questions:

- *What are some traditions of Western Christians that may be problematic or ineffective for Christians in other cultures?*
- *How do our traditions affect our expressions of our faith? How do they create expectations by us about others and the ways they worship and serve?*
- *Which of our traditions are negotiable and flexible? Which are not?*
- *What will happen to our missions efforts if we refuse to consider dropping or modifying some of our long-held traditions?*

Feeding the Hungry Leaders Guide

Acts 11:27-30

²⁷At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius. ²⁹The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea;

Theme: Addressing the chronic hunger and starvation of millions of people around the world is critical to global missions efforts.

Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- Note that the scripture focus for this lesson includes only four verses. Your challenge involves making this brief passage relevant and meaningful to adults in your group.

Many of them may be unaware of the ways that global and domestic hunger actually touch and affect their lives. Because they may not personally know anyone who is hungry, they may never have considered that addressing hunger and helping hungry people is one of their responsibilities. While some adults may understand that global hunger greatly affects missions efforts, many may never have

considered how people's chronic hunger affects their ability to hear and understand the gospel message.

► EthicsDaily.com has a large volume of news stories, editorials and columns related to hunger. The following are representative; you may want to consult these and others as you gather illustrative material and prepare to lead this discussion:

“Coalition Releases ‘Blueprint’ It Says Can End Hunger”
(www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4273);

“Anti-Hunger Report Says Hunger Reduction Goals ‘Derailed’”
(www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4051);

“Bread for the World Asking Congress to Keep Its Promise on Hunger”
(www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3982);

“How Rich are You?”
(www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3942);

“‘Souper Bowl’ Collects \$4 Million”
(www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3866);

“Mayors’ Conference Survey: Hunger, Homelessness on the Rise”
(www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3538);

“U.N. Says Hunger, AIDS on the Rise”
(www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3442);

“U.N. Reports Rise in Hunger in Developing Countries in Late 1990s”
(www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3426);

“Hungry All Year Long”
(www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3314);

“I Missed the Super Bowl”
(www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3743).

► Visit various other Web sites to collect additional information about international and domestic hunger, including:

Baptist World Aid (BWAID), www.bwanet.org/BWAid/index.htm;

Bread for the World, www.bread.org;

Heifer International, www.heifer.org;

America's Second Harvest, www.secondharvest.org;

World Health Organization, www.who.int/en;

UNICEF, www.unicef.org;

Also obtain current statistics related to hunger in your locale.

► Using the statistics you gather and those suggested below, write hunger-related statistics on strips of paper, one per strip.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

► Distribute among adults paper strips on which you have written the following statistics related to hunger (adapted from the Web site of Bread for the World, www.bread.org).

If you prefer, prepare larger sentence strips containing the statistics and attach them to walls around the room.

- 842 million people around the world are hungry.
- Starvation and famine are not the only manifestations of hunger. Chronic undernourishment and vitamin and mineral deficiencies lead to stunted growth, weakness and heightened susceptibility to illness.
- Soup kitchens, food stamps and job training programs are rare in countries in which a large percentage of the population battles hunger. In most countries where large numbers of people are chronically hungry, help is simply not available.
- Of the world's 6.3 billion people, 5 billion live in the developing world, which consists of about 125 low and middle-income countries. Here people have a lower standard of living and have access to fewer goods and services than people in the developed or industrialized world.
- More than 1.2 billion people in the developing world live below the international poverty line and earn less than \$1 per day.
- 798 million people in the developing world are undernourished, which means that they consume less than the minimum number of calories for sound health and growth.
- Too little food results in stunted growth, slow thinking and low energy levels. It can also hinder fetal development and contribute to mental retardation.

- People who must constantly look for ways to find food have less time to work and earn an income.
- Nearly one in three people die prematurely or have disabilities due to poor nutrition and calorie deficiencies.
- Pregnant women, nursing mothers and children are among those at greatest risk for undernourishment.
- Each year, 11 million children under the age of 5 die, more than half from hunger-related causes. Most of these deaths are not due to outright starvation but to diseases that attack children whose bodies are weakened by hunger.
- The HIV/AIDS epidemic is a major obstacle in combating hunger and poverty in developing countries. One problem is that infected adults leave behind children and elderly relatives who have little or no means to provide for themselves.
- Chronic hunger is not only a problem in developing countries. In the United States, 34.9 million people, including almost 13 million children, live in households that experience hunger or the risk of hunger.
- US households which deal with hunger regularly include people who frequently skip meals or eat too little and who have lower quality diets because they cannot afford the food they need.
- Over 22 million people participated in the US food stamp program in August 2003. Participation in this program has risen over the past two years, following years of decline. The economic downturn and result-

ing loss of employment and income have been suggested as a probable cause.

- ▶ Ask adults to read aloud the hunger-related statistics. Supplement them with additional statistics you find, particularly those related to hunger issues and hungry people where you live.

Note that the United Nations Development Program estimates that an additional \$13 billion annually would meet the basic health and nutrition needs of the world's poorest people. People in the United States and Europe spend more than that amount on pet food each year.

Ask:

- *Can we end chronic world hunger and starvation? How?*
- *How can individuals address the problem of global hunger?*
- *What can we collectively do to eliminate global hunger?*
- *How does hunger affect missions efforts?*

▶ Call attention to the information in the Introduction of the Students Guide related to the causes of chronic hunger. In a world of affluence, the fact that people starve to death every day is inexcusable. Stress that the problem of chronic hunger can be eliminated, and it stands in the way of people's ability to hear and respond to the gospel message.

Explore the Bible

- ▶ Using information in the Students Guide, identify Antioch and its importance in the Roman Empire and note how Paul and Barnabas came to be at Antioch.

Read aloud Acts 11:27-28. Point out the role of prophets in this and other New Testament references. Note that while Agabus is also mentioned in Acts 21:10, we know very little about him, other than his function as a prophet.

Also point out that in this situation, a "daughter" church was asked to come to the aid of its mother church. While it is unclear whether Agabus was actually reporting a tragedy that had already occurred, speaking of something still ongoing or foretelling a future event, the situation was dire. Scripture describes the famine as "severe" and indicates that it was "over all the world."

Ask:

- *What effect do images of starving people broadcast regularly on television news channels have on you?*
- *Are you prompted to take any kind of action when you see such images, particularly when they are of children? Why or why not?*
- *Do you think that we regularly receive messages about the world's hunger situation but choose not to listen? Have we become numb to the hunger realities that are ever-present?*

▶ Ask a volunteer to read aloud Acts 11:29-30 and lead adults to discuss what the Christians in Antioch decided to do by asking such questions as:

- *Is the response of Christians to needs such as hunger relief different from the responses of other people? If so, how? Why?*
- *Do we sometimes respond to humanitarian causes from selfish motives?*
- *Why is someone else's hunger our concern?*

► Note that the Christians in Antioch determined, apparently quite quickly and decisively, that the problem of those in Jerusalem was indeed their problem and that they would work together to do what they could to meet this need. Their organizational system was simple: each person gave; the church elders managed the gifts; Barnabas and Paul delivered the gifts.

Ask:

- *Why do you think the Christians at Antioch decided to send their gifts by Paul and Barnabas?*
- *What does the example of this church teach us about hunger ministries?*
- *While it is necessary and important that we send money to reputable relief organizations to help hungry people, why is that not enough? What else do we need to do?*
- *How do social ministries work alongside evangelistic ministries?*

Apply Biblical Truth

► Close by relating the following story from the work of Baptist World Aid:

Zambia is home to one of the world's most appalling hunger situations. Over 400,000 refugees from countries including Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Uganda and Sudan have resettled in Zambia, escaping civil unrest in their homelands. The majority are women and children who literally have nothing: no food, no clothing, no possessions of any kind.

Baptist World Aid has been involved in helping relieve this problem by sending funds to the Baptist Convention of Zambia. In a letter of thanks to Baptist World Aid, Michael Mutale, the convention's general secretary, wrote of one of his experiences as he and other workers distributed food to those waiting in line to receive help:

"Suddenly I heard a noise of a crying mother. I walked up the line to see what had happened. One of the leaders pulled me aside and said, 'Sir, please don't get nearer.' But I said that I wanted to know what had happened.

"I saw a lady throwing herself to the ground holding what seemed to me from afar as a small baby, maybe two or three years old. I asked what had happened and they told me that the baby had just passed away.

"I said *WHY?* They told me that the baby had been suffering from the lack of food. I said *WHAT?* They said the baby's health had been going down for sometime now, the mother is unable to provide food to feed the boy. They told me that ... the mother came to the distribution centre to get food just to save the life of the baby. I wept. I asked leaders to take the mother and the dead baby home and I followed them. I ordered the distribution to continue, but I could see

the faces of the people. They were all affected. I turned back and asked for all of us to pray.

“We went to the grave yard, and they asked me to do the burial. I preached and of course I gave them hope for the future, for I know that baby will live again.

“How can I say Jesus loves them when their children can die out of hunger and those with resources take time to decide when and how such resources should be distributed?”

Mutale concluded his letter by reporting that as he was leaving the distribution site, a group of mothers forcefully asked him, “When are you coming back to save our children?” He had to honestly tell them that he didn’t know. When he returned to his office, he had a letter from Baptist World Aid promising more funds for hunger relief. “Maybe I can rest with the hope that another child shall live because Christ lives,” he said in closing.

► Close by leading adults to determine together at least one thing you will do to address hunger and help hungry people.

Commissioning Missionaries Leaders Guide

Acts 13:1-5

¹Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. ²While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” ³Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. ⁴So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia; and from there they sailed to Cyprus. ⁵When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John also to assist them.

Theme: Commissioning individuals for specific ministries reminds all believers of the sacredness of each person’s call from God and challenges us to obey God’s call to serve.

Before You Teach

- Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.
- Prepare a written list of ministries and missions efforts in which church members are involved and/or that your church supports.

► In consultation with your pastor, minister of education or other church staff member, contact someone from your church who is involved in an ongoing missions or ministry effort such as tutoring or literacy, Habitat for Humanity or other construction ministries, food or clothing pantry, children's after-school programs, jail or prison ministry, nursing home or hospital ministry, etc.

Explain to this person that your class or group will be discussing the idea of commissioning missionaries and would like his or her input on the value of this practice. Ask him or her to participate with your group the day you guide this discussion. Also inquire as to this person's openness to the idea of being "commissioned" by your class or group for this particular ministry, if your church has not already done so.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

► Begin by assigning the following scriptures to individuals: Exodus 3:4; 1 Samuel 3:10; Matthew 4:21; Acts 16:10; Romans 1:1.

Ask each person to read aloud his or her assigned scripture in turn. Then ask:

- *What do the situations described in each scripture have in common?*
- *What are the similarities among these situations? What are the differences?*
- *Has anything like this ever happened to you?*

Note that in each case, God called an individual and set apart this person for a specific task. Review briefly the calls and assigned tasks of Moses, Samuel, James and John, and Paul.

► Ask if anyone has participated in or observed a missionary commissioning service. Lead adults to review what typically happens in such a service and point out elements such as introduction of candidates and places of service; blessings and prayers; challenges or charges; laying on of hands. Then ask those who have participated in or observed such a service:

- *What was your reaction to the service? How did you feel?*
- *What significance did you find in the various elements of the service?*
- *What do you think was the intended effect of the service for those being commissioned? for those observing?*
- *Are commissioning services still relevant? If so, who should be commissioned?*

► Note that in a commissioning service for new missionaries at a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly, Amy Derrick, CBF associate coordinator for Global Service Corps, noted that all Christians are called. "Burning bush or not," she said, "we are all called. We are called to relationship, called to do what God has uniquely gifted us to be, called beyond ourselves, called to love, and called to be the presence of Christ. We really are on holy ground because God is calling each of us. How will we respond? We may run; we may spectate or we may choose to commit."

Then ask: *Do you agree? Is every Christian called? If so, to what?*

► Point out that the writer of the Students Guide lesson, an appointed missionary, asserts that Baptists in particular have tended to “pedestalize” missionaries. Lead adults to discuss this idea by asking such questions as:

- *Do you agree? Have we “set apart” missionaries to the degree that many people put them on a pedestal? How can this be detrimental?*
- *Have we tended to highlight the call to long-time or appointed missionary service to the point that other Christians see the work of missions and ministry as being someone else’s job?*
- *Should we make distinctions between the calls of missionaries and other Christians? If so, how?*

Explore the Bible

► Using the information from the Students Guide, review the origins of the church at Antioch. Identify Barnabas and note why he left Jerusalem and went to the church at Antioch.

► Ask someone to read aloud Acts 13:1-3 and note the diversity among the church at Antioch. Call attention to the possible racial, ethnic and religious differences of the church’s leaders.

Note the specific positions of “prophet” and “teacher.” Explain that while we know very little about their specific ministry or function in the New Testament era, prophets were clearly present in the early church. They likely had

some relation to Old Testament prophets in that they communicated God’s message to the people. Their ministry involved proclamation more than it did prediction. The function of “teachers” was likely one of instruction and direction. Both were key leadership positions within the early church.

► Point out the way the group at Antioch knew to “set apart ... Barnabas and Saul ...” Note that the announcement from the Holy Spirit to do this was apparently made to everyone, not strictly to an individual. Then ask:

- *Why do you think the group fasted and prayed before sending Barnabas and Saul?*
- *Why do you think only Barnabas and Saul were singled out for the mission at Antioch?*
- *What is the significance of ‘laying on hands’? What does it symbolize?*

► Note the simplicity surrounding the occasion of the commissioning of Barnabas and Saul. Then ask:

- *How does the commissioning of Barnabas and Saul compare to commissioning services today? How is it different?*
- *How and why do you think the church moved from the simple commissioning act recorded in Acts 13:1-3 to the elaborate commissioning services of today?*

► Read aloud Acts 13:4-5 and note the destinations of Barnabas and Saul. Point out the significance of Cyprus to

Barnabas and its other connections in the early spread of the gospel. Ask:

- *What method of proclamation did Barnabas and Saul use? Where did they begin to “proclaim the word of God”?*
- *Why were synagogues a logical beginning point for them?*
- *Who was John Mark, and what was his role?*

Apply Biblical Truth

► Ask adults to name all of the missions and ministry activities supported by people in your church (literacy, tutoring, construction, food and clothing pantry, etc.). List these on a chart or board.

► Next, introduce your guest and ask this person to describe the ministry in which he or she is involved. Ask such questions as:

- *How did you become involved in this ministry?*
- *How long have you been involved?*
- *Is this something to which you feel specifically called?*
- *What exactly do you do?*
- *Were you formally commissioned or charged to participate in this ministry?*

- *If not, does that change either your commitment to the ministry or the ministry’s value within God’s kingdom?*
- *Who supports this ministry, and how?*

► Remind adults of the example set by the church at Antioch: they became aware of a need; God’s Spirit guided them to send specific people to help meet that need; they prayed for these individuals and sent them off.

Suggest that each person involved in Christian ministry and missions efforts responds because of a sacred calling from God, and each can be an example and reminder to us to respond in obedience to the tasks to which God calls us.

► If your guest is agreeable, involve your class or group in commissioning him or her to the specific ministry he or she has described. Ask adults to suggest how they would like to do this, in light of the biblical model. Close with prayer, thanking God for allowing us to be involved in missions and ministry efforts locally and globally. Ask God to bless the efforts of each Christian who responds in obedience to these missions opportunities.

Listening to Reports Leaders Guide

Acts 14:24-28

²⁴Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. ²⁵When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. ²⁶From there they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had completed. ²⁷When they arrived, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles. ²⁸And they stayed there with the disciples for some time.

Theme: Listening to reports of those involved in missions helps increase missions involvement and support and is vital in expanding God's kingdom.

Before You Teach

► Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

Note that the passage of scripture for study, discussion and application contains only five short verses, yet it is invaluable for the pattern it suggests for individuals and churches involved in missions.

► Emphasize the value and importance of listening to reports about missions by incorporating into the discussion

a number of stories related to this scripture. Several stories are included in Introduce the Lesson, below.

Search the following Web sites and others of which you are aware to find additional reports of domestic and global missions efforts:

Baptist World Alliance, www.bwanet.org;

Baptist General Association of Virginia, www.vbmb.org;

Bread for the World, www.bread.org;

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, www.thefellowship.info (see also their links to state CBF Web sites);

Global Women, www.globalwomengo.org;

Habitat for Humanity, www.habitat.org;

Heifer International, www.heifer.org.

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

► Begin by relating several of the following examples and/or others you discovered:

- When Southwest Virginia and West Virginia experienced devastating floods in 2004, Virginia Baptist Disaster Relief, a ministry of the Virginia Baptist Men, responded by helping clean up affected homes. The feeding unit was also activated, and

working with the American Red Cross, volunteers prepared and served as many as 8000 meals daily.

- Lauran Bethell, a Global Women board member, leads a small group of people in Prague, Czech Republic, in ministering to prostitutes there. Many have been trafficked from other countries, often tricked or forced to leave their homes for a promised salary they think will provide for their families. Victims of trafficking, in addition to being forced into prostitution, are regularly subjected to gross human rights violations including rape, torture, forced abortions, starvation and threats of torturing or murdering family members.

“We go to the streets to meet the prostitutes because I think that’s where Jesus would be ministering if he were physically present with us now,” Bethell, who lives in Prague, said (see “Sexploitation: A Growing Issue for Women,” www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=4352).

One woman approached Bethell and other volunteers on the street one day and said, “Please pray for my family. I am a long way from home and worried about my children.”

- When massive flooding and mudslides hit the Dominican Republic in May 2004, the Baptist Convention there became involved in relief efforts, raising funds in their churches to help those who lost homes and preparing food parcels to take to the villages in the most affected regions. They also helped with water purification projects and helped distribute clothes, blankets and mosquito nets. The Dominican Baptist Convention has 22 churches and 1,299

members. Baptist World Aid assisted them by providing funds to help purchase necessary supplies.

- Because of Heifer International, Bernadina Maria Salgado, a grandmother in Nicaragua, is her family’s breadwinner. Heifer provided her with training and supplies and then with chickens, which produce eggs that she can not only use to feed her family but also sell for income. She is able to buy things her family could otherwise not afford, simple household items such as soap and salt.

Another Heifer project participant, Rosa Carmen Medina, said, “Life has changed for women in many ways because of this project. Before, I did not understand things. The men were the breadwinners and said everything. But now the women are a part of the community. We are happy and more active with much more confidence. This project is not just for the women but the whole family. We are working together to make a difference” (see www.heifer.org/Our_Work/Success_Stories/In_Latin_America_The_Caribbean/Nicaraguan_Chickens.shtml).

- Nearly 320 people from 19 different US churches, all but one from Texas, participated in an intensive, one-week missions effort in the Lower Rio Grand Valley counties of Hidalgo, Willacy and Cameron. KidsHeart, a missions project sponsored by CBF of Texas, Buckner Children and Family Services and CBF Global Missions, involved participants in ministries including construction projects, Vacation Bible Schools, sports camps, sewing and quilting classes, computer classes, dental and medical clinics and clothing distribution.

Joe Garcia, a migrant worker whose home received some much-needed repairs from volunteers in the group, said, “I never really figured people would come and help somebody without me giving something to them. It feels really, really great to have somebody care for someone like me who doesn’t have that much money. They actually took their time to come and help me for free, and I don’t know how to repay them. I’m grateful they’re here helping me out because I couldn’t afford this. I don’t know how to repay them, but my heart goes out to them. I don’t have the words to describe how grateful I am” (see www.thefellowship.info/News/040803KidsHeart.icm).

► After reporting several missions-related stories such as those above, ask adults if they have any to tell based on their own experiences or the experiences of others they know. Then ask:

- *What is the value of listening to stories about Christians working in ministries with other people in other places?*
- *What effect does hearing such stories have on you individually?*
- *What effect does hearing reports from missionaries and missions volunteers have on a church?*
- *How do you think missions and missionary reports have changed in recent years? What do both missionaries and volunteers emphasize more now than in years past?*

► Suggest that missions work continues and grows in part because those who are involved in missions regularly report to others what they have experienced. As a result, more people capture a vision for God’s ongoing, global missions plan and discover ways that they can become personally involved, both by giving and going. The pattern of going and then returning to report was established very early in the church’s missions enterprise, with Paul and Barnabas giving one of the first known reports.

Explore the Bible

► Remind adults that Paul (then Saul) and Barnabas, “sent out by the Holy Spirit (13:4) and commissioned by the church in Antioch, went on an extensive road trip to do the work the Holy Spirit called them to do. Chapters 13-14 of Acts are devoted to their commissioning, the details of their trip and their return to Antioch.

They embarked on what would become a round trip, traveling to Paphos, Perga, Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, teaching, preaching and establishing new congregations of Christian believers along the way. After Derbe, they began retracing their steps, working their way back to Antioch in Syria, where their trip originated. As they worked their way back, they established elders as leaders in the churches they had earlier established.

Point out that the two men concentrated their efforts in cities because that is where they found the greatest concentration of people. Cities included people from a diversity of backgrounds and ethnicities, so they communicated the message that God’s salvation is for all people.

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud Acts 14:24-26 and lead adults to discuss it by asking such questions as:

- *Why do you think Paul and Barnabas retraced their steps?*
- *Why do you think the two men, on their way back after a very long and full trip, again taught and preached in places they had already been?*
- *How were Paul and Barnabas accountable to the group of believers at Antioch?*
- *What did they do when they returned?*

► Remind adults that when the believers at Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas out, they didn't know where they were going, how long they would be gone or exactly what they would encounter. Given the difficulties of life at that time and the inherent dangers of travel, it was quite possible that one or both of them would not survive the trip. The fact that both not only survived but returned to report tremendous success from their trip was no doubt met with great joy and excitement.

Note that we don't know too many details of exactly what they reported or how, but scripture indicates that they reported what "God had done with them," not what they had been able to do on their own. It also carefully indicates their report that God "has opened a door of faith for the Gentiles," an important reminder for the believers at Antioch that God intends salvation for everyone.

Ask:

- *What effect do you think the report of Paul and Barnabas had on the group of believers at Antioch?*
- *What new levels of awareness and understanding about God and God's plan do you think they achieved?*
- *Why do you think Paul and Barnabas chose to remain at Antioch "for some time" (v 28)?*

Apply Biblical Truth

► Lead adults to develop a list of phrases that complete this statement: *Listening to missions reports is valuable because . . .*

List their responses on a board or chart, and supplement them as necessary with phrases such as these:

- It raises awareness of other people and their needs.
- It affirms God's presence and activity in the world.
- It provides evidence of God's power and provision.
- It offers examples of what God can do through the lives of willing and obedient believers.
- It puts faces to missions so that people learn to see missions as the story of God's interaction with and through people.
- It broadens understandings of other races, cultures and ethnic groups and fosters acceptance and tolerance.

- It instills courage and confidence in those whom God is also calling to go.
- It helps deepen the understanding that missions is everyone's responsibility and that everyone has a part in God's missions plans.
- It fosters accountability to those who send and support those who go.
- It offers those who support missions financially opportunities to see where their money goes and how it is wisely used.
- It reflects the biblical example set by the earliest missionaries.

► Affirm again the importance and value of listening to missions reports by noting the role of the Internet in accessing them.

As an example, check out the Web site of Global Women at www.globalwomengo.org and choose the Global Associate's link to read some of the journal entries of Global Women's first global associate, Susie Allison. Share some of her journal entries or those of another missions volunteer to conclude this lesson.

Also provide women in your group with more information about Global Women. Organized in December 2001, it is a woman-to-woman missions initiative and includes women of diverse ages and Christian denominations. According to its mission and purpose statements, it exists to create worldwide friendships among women for shared learning and service and seeks to enlarge understanding of what Christ means for women around the world.

"Everything Global Women does," says the organization's Web site, "is designed to take Christian ministry and witness to women, especially those limited in access to Jesus, while supporting and encouraging women who have received a call of God to minister throughout our world. "

► Remind adults that people who participate in missions have a responsibility to give reports to people who support them, and people who support them have a responsibility to listen and respond to what they hear. All people have a responsibility to determine how they fit into God's ongoing missions plan.

Compromising as Courage Leaders Guide

Acts 15:1-21

¹Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”²And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.³So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers.⁴When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.⁵But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.”⁶The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.⁷After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers.⁸And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us;⁹and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.¹⁰Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?¹¹On the

contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.”¹²The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.¹³After they finished speaking, James replied, “My brothers, listen to me.¹⁴Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name.¹⁵This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written, ¹⁶‘After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up,¹⁷so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things ¹⁸known from long ago.’¹⁹Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God,²⁰but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.²¹For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.”

Theme: Because Christianity involves an inward conversion of the heart rather than an outward physical symbol, we work toward the common good with those whose views and practices differ from ours.

Before You Teach

► Read the focal passage, the lesson from the Students Guide and the following teaching suggestions.

► The following movie review from EthicsDaily.com includes suggestions for applying the truths of this scripture. You may want to read it in its entirety:

“House of Sand and Fog,” (www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3647).

As You Teach

Introduce the Lesson

► Begin by stating each of the following descriptions and asking adults to identify the product with which it is associated:

- a clown dressed in yellow with bright red hair
- a gecko best known for riding in vehicles
- a large green giant, often accompanied by a small green sprout
- an excessively energetic pink rabbit
- a talking tiger named Tony
- a cow named Elsie
- a “swoosh” mark
- a multi-colored apple

- a girl holding an umbrella, pictured on a blue box

► Point out the proliferation of symbols or icons in the advertising industry, and acknowledge how easily we identify a product or service by its symbol. Then ask:

- *What are some common symbols today, apart from those used in advertising?*
- *What are some ways people use markings and symbols to identify with a particular movement, philosophy or group?*
- *Does a physical symbol in and of itself carry any power? Why or why not?*
- *What are some Christian symbols, and how are they used? Does wearing a piece of jewelry with a Christian symbol necessarily mean that the person follows Christ?*

► Connect the discussion about symbols to the information about tattoos in the Introduction of the Students Guide. Remind adults of the Jewish tradition of circumcision, which they viewed not only as an act of devotion to God but which Jewish Christians also felt was necessary to complete salvation through Christ. Their belief and insistence that Gentiles also undergo circumcision led believers in Antioch to engage in thoughtful debate and dialogue about the nature and true expression of salvation.

Stress that Christianity involves inward conversion and is not dependent upon any outward physical expression. As we work with people who hold views and practices that differ from ours, we must, for the sake of missions, work toward compromise for the common good. The early

church's struggle and example offers us a worthy model for doing so.

Explore the Bible

► Note that the incident recorded in Acts 15 began shortly after Paul and Barnabas had finished their first missionary journey and had returned to their sponsoring church in Antioch.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Acts 15:1-5. Identify the significant characters and note the source of the disagreement. Unable to reach a consensus, the believers in Antioch sent Paul, Barnabas and "some of the others" (v 2) to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles and elders about the issue.

Point out that along the way, they reported to believers in Phoenicia and Samaria "the conversation of the Gentiles" (v 3), bringing them great joy. The salvation of the Gentiles was never in question as far as Paul and Barnabas were concerned. Ask:

- *Why was circumcision necessary, according to the Pharisees?*

► Read aloud Acts 15:6-12 and note Peter's role in the discussion. Lead adults to identify Peter's line of reasoning, including these points:

- his particular role in taking the message of salvation to the Gentiles;
- the fact that God gave the Holy Spirit to Gentile believers, just as God gave it to Jewish believers;

- the fact that God cleansed the hearts of Gentile believers by faith and "made no distinction" between Jewish and Gentile believers.

Then ask:

- *What two issues did this meeting address? With which did Peter deal first?*
- *What did Peter mean when he asked his Jewish brothers why they were "putting God to the test" (v 10)?*
- *What did he mean when he referred to "a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear" (v 10)?*
- *How, according to Peter, is anyone saved?*
- *What happened following Peter's speech? Why do you think it was important for the group to hear from Paul and Barnabas about their experiences with Gentiles?*

► Ask a volunteer to read aloud Acts 15:13-21 and lead adults to discuss it by asking such questions as:

- *What issue did James deal with, and how?*
- *What did he ask Jewish believers to do?*
- *What did he ask Gentile believers to do?*
- *How did James's request require compromise from everyone?*

- *In what ways were his requests courageous and risky?*

Stress that James sought a compromise by recommending that Gentile Christians not be required to undergo circumcision and that, in turn, they make some concessions related to behaviors that were problematic to Jewish believers.

Apply Biblical Truth

► Lead adults to identify traditions, biases and practices that can potentially cause conflict and division among believers today. Ask them to cite examples related to issues such as:

- culture
- ethnicity
- political beliefs and opinions
- economics
- worship styles
- language
- age
- biblical interpretation

Ask:

- *What happens when we allow issues such as these to become more important than our common faith in and commitment to following Jesus Christ?*

- *What does the early church's model teach us about compromise?*

► Identify the “all-or-nothing” mindset as described in the Students Guide, the attitude whereby some Christians contend that if their views and practices are not universally accepted, they must disengage from involvement. Suggest that such an attitude reflects the unwillingness and lack of courage to compromise for the common good.

Stress that our worldview, formed as a result of our relationship with Christ, should cause us to hold others in such high esteem that we respect their opinions and traditions, even if we disagree with them. At stake is the harmony of the global Christian community.

► Recall for adults the 2003 film “House of Sand and Fog,” which tells the story of two people engaged in a battle of wills. Kathy (played by Jennifer Connelly) loses her parents’ home as a result of a government mistake over property taxes. Ben Kingsley plays an Iranian general named Behrani who purchases Kathy’s house, hoping to provide his family with a new life.

“Both need the house in many ways for the same moral reason: family,” said EthicsDaily.com movie reviewer Roger Thomas. Yet neither is willing to compromise or even speak rationally to the other. “These are not evil people doing evil things. These are normal people making bad choices and refusing to consider that the good and righteous choice lies beyond their wishes” (www.ethicsdaily.com/article_detail.cfm?AID=3647).

The film has at least two important lessons, Thomas wrote. “First, the film is a commentary on contemporary American

society where people have lost the ability to listen and care. In this fast-paced world where material success and possessions mean almost everything, it is easy to let one's selfish desires mute the needs of another. The other lesson concerns the escalation of unrighteous choices. Sin, by its nature, expands and complicates life. As Kathy and Behrani each choose to escalate the situation, it becomes harder for goodness to prevail."

Suggest that open, honest dialogue that allows individuals to surface differences and disagreements can lead to effective compromise that works toward the common good. We often reach the best and most righteous choices when we listen and care.

Check out these other undated adult Bible study curricula from Acacia Resources!



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- *Looking at Leadership: Lessons from 1 and 2 Kings*
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- *Honoring the Ten Commandments: Monument or Movement?*

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