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CHRISTIANS AND DEMOCRACY

A series of twelve Bible Studies from Angola



Adapted for use in South Africa and published by:
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Crisis Care

Church & Society Committee, United Congregational Church

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Diakonia

Durban & District Council of Churches

Ecumenical Centre Trust

Human Rights Committee, Evangelical Lutheran Church

Justice & Peace Commission, Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Durban

Justice & Peace Commission, Roman Catholic Diocese of Mariannhill

Justice & Reconciliation Committee, Methodist Church

Justice & Reconciliation Department, Anglican Church

Practical Ministries

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INTRODUCTION

The 12 bible studies in this booklet have been adapted from a series published by the Angola Christian Council in preparation for the Angolan elections in 1992.

We believe that, in this adapted form, they are very suited to South Africa. We hope they will prove useful to all sorts of grassroots bible study and faith sharing groups as well as to other small Christian communities, church groups and organisations.

We have entered a period of profound importance for the future of democracy in South Africa. It is an exciting period and yet full of risks and threats to the democracy which is coming to birth. These bible studies have been made available because we are convinced the church and Christians generally have an important role in building democracy. If we are to make this contribution, much prayer, reflection and training will be needed. We hope that these studies will contribute to that great effort which is already under way in many parts of South Africa.

The style of these studies is quite simple and calls for full and active participation. Every Christian has had experiences that are relevant to these discussions. Moreover God's Spirit can speak to each participant and these insights can be shared with other Christian sisters and brothers. We can find solutions to the many problems we face by reflecting with other concerned Christians.

Please let us know how useful your group has found these studies, by writing to us:

"Education for Democracy":

A Campaign of Natal Churches

PO Box 1879

Durban 4000.

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HOW TO USE THESE BIBLE STUDIES

When your group gets together, you will probably begin your meeting by greeting each other and talking about events that have happened since you last met.

Perhaps you then sing a hymn and someone opens the meeting with a prayer.

THE REAL-LIFE STORIES

To start the study someone reads the first of the real-life stories, and then the second story is read by a second person. These stories tell us about experiences many of us have had.

The questions that follow the stories don't require a "correct answer". They are meant to start a discussion, to open a debate.

You will find the names of political parties in these stories. They aren't real names: we created the names SAJP (South African Justice Party) and SACM (South African Citizens' Movement). We ask group members please not to try to identify these with any real party!

The first part of the study should take about half an hour. Sometimes people may have so much to share that a half hour will not be enough. In this case, it would be better to do only the first part and leave the biblical text for the next meeting.

This first part is only to prepare the soil so the seed can be planted. Its aim is to help us realize that the problem deserves to be thought about and discussed. Then we will be ready for God's answer in the biblical text.

THE BIBLICAL TEXT

Before the second part of the study, you could sing another hymn and ask one of the group to say a prayer. This is very important because without the help of the Holy Spirit, you won't be able to see the connection between our life and the life of the people in the bible.

After singing and praying, someone can be invited to read aloud the text indicated. Group members will need to bring their own bibles for each study. It is useful to repeat the reading, perhaps

from a different translation.

Stop for a while for any questions to do with understanding. Where a word seems difficult, or a sentence a bit strange, ask one another.

Then begin the discussion. The list of questions should not be answered as if it was a school test. They are meant to help us discover what there is in this text that can assist us in the particular situation we live in.

THE GROUP FACILITATOR

Each group should have a facilitator. This can be a trained person, but that's not essential. He or she is simply the one who at this stage of the study has a key role to play.

In every group there are members who are quicker to speak out, who immediately get an idea and can express it easily. Others don't respond so quickly. They struggle to find the right words. They think others speak better and therefore they don't have the courage to speak up.

But sometimes they may be the ones with bright ideas! That is why the facilitator must make sure everybody has their turn to speak. She or he must encourage the timid and stop those who speak too much. The facilitator should invite the silent to say something and interrupt any who make long speeches.

Remember – each of you has something to say! In a group you have the right and duty to participate. Everyone has their own life and own experiences which can help others to understand better what God wants to tell us.

"I know the plans I have for you: peace and not disaster, and a future full of hope! It is I, the eternal God, who speaks." Jer. 29,11

STEP 1

TWO REAL-LIFE STORIES

Mr. Dlamini was travelling to work by bus early one morning when suddenly there were armed men with balaclavas standing in the middle of the road. They stopped the bus and fired randomly at the passengers with their AK 47s. Mr Dlamini was one of those killed. Much later that day, Mrs Dlamini heard what had happened. She and her whole family were plunged into grief. "They have killed my husband! Why? Where are we heading to? Doesn't God see these things?" Mrs Dlamini lost all hope.



"We are lost! This anguish is too much for us! God has abandoned us. God has hidden and does not want to see the evil of our people any longer. The wicked have multiplied. They do not know God. They do not care about God and they persecute the poor. The evildoers also speak blasphemies against God and despise us. Everything they do turns out right and they know no failure. They are full of lies and threats and only talk violence and wickedness. They hide themselves and wait for the innocent, to kill them, saying: 'God does not care. God's eyes are closed and cannot see any longer.' "

These are the voices of the people of God, who cry out their despair. Happy are those who still manage to trust: "But the Lord hears the cries of the oppressed and of the orphans and God's judgement will come in their favour, so that humankind, who are mortals, may strike terror no more." (Ps. 10).

LET US REFLECT

1. Have you ever thought: "God has abandoned us. God has forgotten us?" In what circumstances?
2. Which of our people's ills seem to you to be incurable?
3. "Mrs Dlamini should know that these days that's how things are." Are they, really? Do we have to hide, to run away? Should we simply accept that it's too dangerous even to travel to work?
4. "Time heals." Do you know any other way out for someone who has fallen into a pit of despair?

STEP 2

LET US READ THE BIBLE

Micah lives in a very threatening situation. The central government in Judah, in Jerusalem, is corrupt and unjust, especially in its treatment of people from the country. Assyria, the great power of the region, threatens the small kingdom of Judah. In his analysis of the situation, Micah uses sour words. But God gives him something else to say.

Read Micah 4, 1-5

STEP 3

LET US DISCOVER GOD'S MESSAGE FOR US

1. Which sentence warms your heart, and makes you sigh: "I wish it was like that!"
2. We have been told: "Religion is like alcohol or like a drug. It makes you dream so that you can bear your misery as if sleeping." Micah has a vision. Does he put us to sleep or revive us? How?
3. When we hear: "There is peace in South Africa", we start dreaming about real peace. Are there elements of your dreams in this text? Which?
4. If you don't find all of your dreams for peace in this text, can you remember other promises of God?
5. Read again the good things that God promises us. Compare these with our lives. What must change?
6. Who or what seems to block the peace? Why?
7. Peace does not mean: "We have no more conflicts," but "We know how to handle conflicts creatively and without violence." Do you agree? Why?
8. As Christians we have been called to be "peacemakers". What must we do in our community, in practical terms, to be a sign of God's peace?

When they attacked the village, Ma Mkhize did not have time to hide in the bush with her husband. When old Albert returned to the house, he found his wife dead. But he had seen the faces of the men who had attacked them. He will never forget them. A long time afterwards, he sees one of them in town.

Old Albert calls his relatives and explains: "That man is one of the group that killed Ma Mkhize." So, his children and his nephews go one night and in an ambush, they beat him up. The young man escapes, but will never be able to move his legs again.



The great king David is nearly dying. He calls his son Solomon, the future king, to let him know his last will: "I am on my way to where all of us will go one day. Be courageous, be a real man! Follow God's will in everything so that God will bless you." But, besides this very wise advice, old David tells him about two enemies, Joab and Shimei. Solomon must "take care of them". David has already promised Shimei that he would not have him killed, but now he tells his son: "You are a wise man and you must not let him go without punishment. You know what you must do so that he dies." Solomon obeys and sends for Benaiah. Benaiah then goes and attacks Shimei and he dies.

(1 Kings 2)

LET US REFLECT

These are two cases of revenge. Some people think it is a matter of justice to make others pay for whatever wrong they have done. Many people in our land have plenty of reasons to seek revenge.

- 1.** Do you know of any case when someone tried to take revenge like old Albert or old David? Tell us about it.
- 2.** Some people say: "You are a coward if you do not make others pay for what they have done to you." Even king David encourages his son in this regard. What do you think of this statement?
- 3.** "True Christian humility means that you accept everything". Is this correct?

4. "But we must cut evil by its roots, otherwise it grows and spoils everything!" Discuss this.

STEP 2

LET US READ THE BIBLE

Joseph, son of Jacob, had every right to try to get back at his brothers who had been so bad to him, beating him up and throwing him into a well and after that selling him to foreigners as a slave. But he became a very powerful man in Egypt. He had all the influence he needed to have his brothers punished. Let us see how he reacts:

Read Genesis 50, 15-21

STEP 3

LET US DISCOVER GOD'S MESSAGE FOR US

1. Which sentence made you think: "That's it. That's right." Why?
2. Where did you feel a bit uneasy? Which sentence do you find quite astonishing? Why?
3. Someone might say: "It is easy to forgive, when you are in power like Joseph. But old Albert is just a farmer. We shouldn't confuse the issue." What do you think?
4. Joseph says: "I cannot play God." Could this phrase also help old Albert? How?
5. Sometimes we say: "It doesn't matter", when someone hurts us. But then the bitterness grows and finally revenge turns out to be even stronger. How can we avoid that?
6. On the cross, Jesus said: "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." Jesus really forgave them. Do you know of any case when someone else really did forgive?
7. Jesus says: "I tell you that you must not get back at those who have mistreated you. If anyone slaps your cheek, turn the other cheek for them to slap as well." (Mt 5,39) Have you ever experienced a situation like this where Jesus' advice did help?
8. What are we going to do in reality to practise forgiveness?

LET US DEEPEN OUR REFLECTION

Jesus speaks about this matter. In the Sermon on the Mount, he teaches those who want to learn peace. He speaks about conflicts and how to deal with them (Mt 5, 22-26); he talks about revenge

(Mt 5, 38-42); he talks about loving enemies (Mt 5,43-48). He also speaks about the last judgement (Mt 7,1-5). Read those texts to be encouraged to practise forgiveness.

Be careful. This advice isn't a new, even more difficult law to oppress us. The pharisees had laws and regulations that were like a prison. But Jesus advises his followers: "If your justice is not better (i.e. of a better quality) you will be far from God." (Mt 5,20). That better justice is love without limitations, that great freedom of the sons and daughters of God.

STEP 1

TWO REAL-LIFE STORIES

“What? Angela September? Leave her! She’s not worth it! Have you heard what she did?” “No, tell us about it!” And so the gossip started. The neighbour told her brother-in-law, who told his colleague, who told his uncle. It was not long before the whole world knew about it. They started despising Angela in such a way that she couldn’t bear it any longer and ran away.

And it was not even true! What everybody was saying was totally wrong. But no one tried to find out the truth, they only wanted to tell others what they had heard.



“What? Paul? Let him be! He is not worth it. One day he says yes next he says no.” Some Christians in Corinth must have thought like this. (II Cor. 1,17; 10,10.). People gossiped and gossiped until everybody had heard about it. Paul could not go back to Corinth. But what they were saying was not true. Paul had to defend himself; so he wrote the second letter to the Corinthians, full of tears. Jesus also suffered because of prejudice: “He is mad.” (Mk 3,21) “He is possessed by a demon.” (Mk 3,22) “He is a glutton and a drunkard!” (Mt 11,19) “He deceives the people.” (Jn 7,12)

LET US REFLECT

Our tongues can destroy or save lives. The tongue is small but very important. James even says: “Those who can control their tongues, can control themselves completely.” (James 3,2)

Let’s take a closer look at this:

1. Have you ever been a victim of gossip?
2. Have you contributed at any time to gossip and prejudice making someone else’s life difficult as people did to Angela and to Paul and Jesus?
3. These days, our tongues have become more powerful because of the newspapers, radio and T.V. Do you know of any instance when this “public tongue” made someone unhappy? Tell us about it.
4. Why do we like to talk about other people’s failings?

STEP 2

LET US READ THE BIBLE

It is important to keep a good relationship with our neighbours. But many things interfere with peace and reconciliation.

Read Matthew, 7,1-5 & 12

STEP 3

LET US DISCOVER GOD'S MESSAGE FOR US

1. Many parents want to remove the speck from their children's eyes, but they do not see the beam in their own. What kind of beams could there be?
2. Why is it so easy to see the speck in another person's eye, but so difficult to notice the beam in our own?
3. If Angela's neighbours had remembered v.12 - what do you think would have happened? (Read v.12 again).
4. Has it ever happened to you that someone tried to remove the speck from your eye, while carrying a beam in his or hers? Tell us about it.
5. There is also the possibility of lying through silence. There are important things that no one tells for fear. A lie can be not only what is said but also what is not mentioned. We can hear that on the radio and see it on television. Can you give examples?
6. Jesus gives us the "golden rule", v.12 which is like a summary of all his teachings. It is also applicable to prejudice and gossip. How?
7. What would we like to do in real life to practise what we have heard and meditated about?

Gert was born in Pretoria but went to a church school in Natal where he met Thandi. A few years after they finished their schooling, Thandi and Gert decided to get married. Initially, Thandi's family was reluctant to accept the proposed marriage. After much discussion, the family finally agreed to the young couple's plans. A big party was held for the two sweethearts. On the day of their wedding, while they were filing out of church, Thandi's old aunt shouted at the top of her voice: "This is not going to work. There is an old proverb which says two banks of a river can never meet." Today, two years later, Gert and Thandi and their child are a happy family. But there is no doubt that Thandi still feels like a stranger in the middle of her own extended family.



Jesus left Judaea and went back to Galilee; on his way he had to go through Samaria. In Samaria he came to a town called Sychar, which was not far from the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired by the journey, sat down by the well.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink of water."

The woman answered, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan – so how can you ask me for a drink? (Jews will not use the same cups and bowls that Samaritans use.) (John 4)

LET US REFLECT

No one likes to be called a "racist" or "tribalist", but it is natural that many of us feel more comfortable among those who speak like us and have the same habits and traditions. How can we overcome fear and distrust, when everything is complicated by a long history of apartheid and oppression? Let's discuss the following questions:

1. We have heard of two cases, where people were able to overcome their prejudices. Do you know of any other cases? Tell the group about them.
2. Fear and distrust can deceive us and prevent us from entering

into relationships with those who are different from us. Have you had such an experience?

3. The Samaritans were a despised people. People talked ill of them and made jokes about them. Can you think of any group in South Africa who are despised and joked about?

STEP 2

LET US READ THE BIBLE

The problem of prejudice is not new. Some prejudices can be very strong and can make life difficult for many people, even when there is goodwill and a good foundation, such as in the church. The first Christians had to search for solutions to problems of prejudice as indicated in the next reading.

Read Acts 6,1-7

STEP 3

LET US DISCOVER GOD'S MESSAGE FOR US

1. The Greek-speaking widows felt discriminated against in relation to those who spoke Hebrew. How could this be? Do you recall similar cases in your life?
2. It is normal that I think first of my relatives. But in this concrete case, it led to injustice; the assistance was not well distributed. The apostles did not fight against "tribalism" in general, but searched for a real solution to a real problem. When do you think we started speaking about "racism" and "tribalism"? When did these injustices start in our society?
3. To be nominated deacon, it was not necessary to be a good administrator. The apostles looked for trustworthy people "full of the Holy Spirit". Why? Remember what happened at Pentecost, when the Spirit of God came to break the barriers that hindered understanding.
4. How can we recognize whether a person is full of the Holy Spirit? Is it easy?
5. Paul writes to the Ephesians and tells them that the "wall of separation has fallen" (Eph. 2,14). Have you had real experiences about "walls of separation" falling which you would like to share?
6. What should we do in practice to show that the wall of separation has fallen? What signs of peace, unity, racial harmony and political tolerance should we give?



STEP 1

TWO REAL-LIFE STORIES

Mandla was a tailor. Things were going very well for him. So, he decided to get a second wife besides Nomsa who had already given him five children. He chose a young girl and started to build a second house. Nomsa decided to speak to her husband about the issue. She said to him: "Listen, Mandla, I cannot bear it any longer. I have always been a faithful and good wife to you. I cannot accept a rival in my relationship with you. I am ready to forgive you but please send that girl away. Let us start afresh." Mandla lost his temper, screamed and beat up Nomsa. "I am your husband", he yelled, "I have the right to get another wife besides you. You must shut up now!" Nomsa tried hard to reconcile with her husband but failed. She therefore decided to pack up her things and left. After some time, Mandla realized that he had lost a good wife. But then it was too late, he could not bring Nomsa back.



When Rehoboam came to power, after the death of his father Solomon, the people sent a delegation to tell him: "Your father Solomon treated us harshly and placed heavy burdens on us. If you make these burdens lighter and make life easier for us, we will be your loyal subjects". King Rehoboam consulted the older men who had served as his father Solomon's advisers. "What answer do you advise me to give these people?", he asked. They replied: "If you want to serve this people well, give a favourable answer to their request, and they will always serve you loyally." He ignored their advice and instead sought the advice of younger advisers who told him to place heavier burdens on the people. But the people did not accept this. Ten of the twelve tribes deserted the king. Israel was divided, everything was spoiled. (1 Kings 12)

LET US REFLECT

Stubbornness does not pay. For many of us, it's very difficult to accept our mistakes and to make amends. Let's consider the following points:

1. Mandla's stubbornness and that of King Rehoboam led to division and caused damage beyond repair. Do you know similar cases where stubbornness ended in a similar way?
2. If both Mandla and King Rehoboam recognized their mistakes and looked for new solutions, everything would have been different. Why do we always try to impose our will? Why is it so difficult to give up what we want to do?
3. Rehoboam took a fatal decision because he followed bad advice. Each of us has his or her advisors. Not all of them are good advisors. How can you tell who the good ones are?

STEP 2

LET US READ THE BIBLE

Read Genesis 13,1-13

STEP 3

LET US DISCOVER GOD'S MESSAGE FOR US

1. Abram is the older of the two, the uncle. He should have the right to be the first one to make his choice of land. Why didn't he do this?
2. Abram and Lot separated, but they did it in peace. We know many separations that are not peaceful. What causes such problems?
3. Unfortunately, even the church has been affected by divisions. We often hear statements such as this: "Where Christ's truth is at stake, we cannot compromise." Should it really be like this? Discuss.
4. Sometimes we are forced to do what someone else wants us to do because he or she is more powerful. In this case, we see that Abram felt free enough to allow Lot to choose the land – even though he was older, wealthier and stronger. Have you ever felt that kind of freedom to allow someone else to make their choice before you do?
5. Abram paid a high price for peace. He accepted the dry land and did not insist on his rights as the older. Have you ever paid a high price for peace – in your family, in the church, at work, in your town or village? Have you ever benefited from the price that someone else had to pay?
6. There are those who say: "Christians must always do what others want them to do in order to avoid conflict." Is this right?
7. There is a prayer that goes like this:

"Lord,

· Give me the freedom to accept the things
that I cannot change.

Give me the courage to change the things
that I can change.

Give me the wisdom
to know the difference."

Can this prayer help us on the issue of whether to compromise
or not? Can you give examples.

8. What can we do in reality to put into practice what we have
discovered?

STEP 1

TWO REAL-LIFE STORIES

Peter is a member of a political party known as SACM, the South African Citizens' Movement. As the electoral propaganda has already started, some SACM leaders are mobilizing all their supporters to win the elections. Peter's sister, Juliet, is a pastor. One evening Peter paid her a visit, just to have a good chat. "Listen, sister," Peter said to Juliet, "you know very well that people do not understand certain things. They can believe all the lies that the other political parties are telling them. You know that after all it is only SACM that deserves to be trusted. You see Juliet, as a pastor, people do listen to you. You have influence over them. Can't you speak to them in church about SACM? SACM has to win!"

Juliet replied: "Peter, you know that I am also a member of SACM. Of course I want people to vote for the right party. But I cannot abuse my position by imposing my will on them."



Phillip goes to Samaria to announce the Good News. Everyone feels happy, as many are cured of their ills and freed by the power of God.

Simon is a highly respected man there. He knows the secrets that have helped or at least impressed people. They say: "This man has the power of God." But they discover afterwards that Simon's magic was nothing compared with the freedom that the Gospel brings. Even Simon converted and asked for baptism. Hearing what had happened in Samaria, Peter and John went there. When Simon saw that the Spirit was given to those on whom the apostles laid hands, the converted "witchdoctor" offers money to Peter and John:

– I want you to give me that power as well.

But Peter answers:

– May God send you to hell with your money! Your heart is not honest and it is full of envy.

Simon gets a fright, understands that he was wrong and asks for forgiveness.

(Acts 8)

LET US REFLECT

The church has a powerful voice to which the people listen; so, the church has influence. Jesus gave his followers the power to free people so that they can have life in abundance. But there is a risk: someone can misunderstand things - like Juliet's brother Peter, or Simon in the Bible. There is the risk of using the church's power and influence for selfish motives. The temptation of power also threatened Jesus in the desert (Luke 4,5-8). But Jesus resisted, just like Peter and John and Pastor Juliet. We have entered the age of democracy that gives everyone the right to express their ideas and to participate in decision-making processes. We can also fall under the temptation of power. It is, therefore, better to be prepared.

1. Some people use the name and the power of the church for their own ends. We have two examples of people who resisted that temptation. Do you know of any other cases like these two? Discuss.
2. "Politics is a dirty business. Christians have to keep themselves outside these worldly concerns." What do you think?
3. Juliet, the pastor, tells her brother Peter: "I am also a member of SACM, but I do not want to impose my opinion on other people." Do you agree with her? Is it possible to keep things separate like this?

STEP 2

LET US READ THE BIBLE

In Jesus' time, government control was in the hands of kings. To get a position near the king meant that one had the king's confidence and could participate in decision-making. James and John have a privileged place in the group of twelve. John is the "beloved disciple". Both went with Jesus to the mount where they encountered Moses and Elijah, and Jesus appeared in the light of God's glory. We must remember this to understand why the mother of the two sons in the next story posed the question to Jesus.

Read Matthew 20,20-28

STEP 3 LET US DISCOVER GOD'S MESSAGE FOR US

- 1.** The other ten disciples became angry when the mother of the two sons made her request to Jesus. Why? Would you also get angry with such a request?
- 2.** The two sons want more prestige, they desire higher positions. How many of us prefer to have power over others than to share with them in decision-making?
- 3.** "You don't know what you are asking for." Jesus does not condemn, but explains. Power deceives. He proposes another way. Do you know cases of people who behave like Jesus? Discuss.
- 4.** Someone said: "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Discuss.
- 5.** Through power, we can get anything but love. Those with power can often make people do what they want them to do, but they can never force them to love them. Discuss.
- 6.** God's power is love. Do you know of any cases when this power managed to win over someone? How did it happen?
- 7.** What can we do to practise what we have discovered? How are we going to be of service to others rather than trying to have power over them?

STEP 1

TWO REAL-LIFE STORIES

Placards appeared in the streets, flags were hanging from trees and people handed out pamphlets and booklets with political slogans: "You deserve a better life, Vote SACM"; "Peace and Stability under an SACM government"; "A new era has come with SAJP (South African Justice Party)"; and "Health and Education for all under SAJP." Mrs Ndelu read all these messages and remembered that the cost of food and other items had gone up. She remembered how SACM youths beat up her nephew because he was wearing a T-shirt with an SAJP slogan. How she and her sister had to wait for five hours at the emergency section of the hospital when her sister-in-law was hit by a drunken driver in an SAJP political campaign procession. That all political parties were accusing and blaming each other for the country's misery and problems. At the same time, the parties were promising a better future to everyone if elected. For a change, she thought to herself, she would like to hear someone say, "We have committed errors in the past and we are sorry."



Jeremiah, the prophet, observed with a critical eye the situation of the people. He saw their misery and heard their cries. "We expected peace and nothing good has happened to us," they cried, and, "we expected rest and we got terror." The prophet did not want to listen to the political and religious leaders' propaganda any more.

God tells the prophet to say to them: "None of you have been sorry for their wickedness; none of you have asked, 'What have I done wrong?' They all keep going their way, like a horse rushing in battle.

"They are stubborn and they carry on with their ways without asking any advice. Do they feel ashamed for having done the things that are abominable to me? No. They do not know what it is to be ashamed."

(Jeremiah 8)

LET US REFLECT

1. Mrs. Ndelu and the prophet Jeremiah have the same desire, to hear the truth. Do thoughts like these also cross your mind?

2. During a political seminar for SACM party workers, participants are told by their instructor that not all truth should be told. A good politician, says the instructor, is one who tells only part of the truth. Discuss.
3. Is this attitude only common among politicians, or is it also found among non-politicians?
4. Mrs. Ndelu and the prophet Jeremiah look for people who accept their own faults or mistakes. Do you know examples of people like that?
5. Why is it so difficult to accept our mistakes? Do you have your own experiences to share?

STEP 2

LET US READ THE BIBLE

For James, the tongue is the most dangerous member of our body. Someone who talks without thinking can be very destructive. Let's see if the advice in the letter of James will help us to know what can contribute to a good life.

Read James 3:2,5,3-18

STEP 3

LET US DISCOVER GOD'S MESSAGE FOR US

1. Which is the most interesting verse for you? Why?
2. The tongue is like a fire that destroys. Do you know of any examples of this? Has it ever happened to you?
3. Selfishness and envy are born of the fear of being left behind and losing status. Do you know this fear? Do you have experiences to share?
4. "Wise people, in the Christian sense, are those who accept everything, people who know how to keep quiet." Discuss.
5. It is wise to listen to the opinions of other people. But there are some wrong opinions and even dangerous ones. Should we listen to wrong and dangerous opinions? Isn't it better to tell a person expressing a bad opinion to keep quiet?
6. Someone once said that to make war is to carry on doing politics, only differently. In fact, a political struggle is a kind of war. We have been called to participate actively in the political life of our country. On the other hand, James says that wise people are peace loving, they don't engage in war. How can we reconcile these two things?
7. A person who tries to be a peacemaker runs the risk of being

labelled a hypocrite. Have you ever gone through this experience? How can we avoid this?

8. When it comes to political choices, we are called to choose the option that will bring about justice and peace (v.18). How can we do this?
9. What should we do to put into practice the wisdom that God promises and gives us?

CARRYING OUT PROMISES

STEP 1

TWO REAL-LIFE STORIES

One day, Saths Naidoo went to the local Home Affairs office to try and secure an identity document to enable him to vote. The Home Affairs officer-in-charge told him that his office had run out of application forms for identity documents. He told Saths to come back in two months' time. Disappointed at the response from the I.D. office, Saths decided to go to the births' registry section of the department to try and obtain a birth certificate. While there, he noticed someone who attended the same church who worked in that office. This man promised Saths that everything would be fine and that Saths' birth certificate would be ready within two days. After two days, Saths decided to go and check on his birth certificate, but his contact told him: "Come back tomorrow because the head of department who approves all the applications did not report for work today." The following day, Saths decided to try his luck again, but was told by his contact that he was tied up all day attending a departmental meeting and would not be able to help Saths. He promised that once the certificate was ready, he would personally deliver it to Saths' house. Saths left the office, demoralized. As he was walking out, an idea crossed his mind, to go and check on the identity document application forms. There, the officer told him the forms were available and that he would be able to get a Voter Card within ten minutes.



A man had two sons. He told the older one: "Today, you go and work in the field" He answered: "I don't want to go." But after that he changed his mind and went. The father then gave the same instruction to the younger son. He answered promptly: "Yes, father!" But he did not go.

Jesus tells this story and asks:

– Which of the two sons did what the father wanted him to do?
(Matthew 21)

LET US REFLECT

1. One of the sons refused, but then did what he had been asked to do. The same thing happened with the clerk at the Home Affairs office. Has such a situation ever happened to you?
2. It's easy to make a promise, but hard to keep it. Have you ever made a promise that you could not keep?
3. Have you ever been disillusioned by someone who promised something they did not do?
4. Politicians make many promises about what they will do if they come to power. What is the danger of these promises? Can politicians be held to their promises? How?
5. "I do not make promises, because when one makes promises, one is compelled to fulfil them." Is this true?
6. God makes promises. Have you had the experience of how God kept a promise? Tell us about it.

STEP 2

LET US READ THE BIBLE

Actions speak louder than words. In God's eyes, it seems that good actions are better than good doctrine. Jesus talks about this in a long parable about the last judgment.

Read Matthew 25, 31-46

STEP 3

LET US DISCOVER GOD'S MESSAGE FOR US

1. Do you feel relieved after reading the above text? Doesn't Jesus speak of our own problems in South Africa: hunger, thirst, sickness, lack of housing, crime, violence etc? Who are the "least" among us that Jesus is talking about?
2. Does the text make you frightened of what is to happen on judgement day? Why?
3. In these days of widespread crime, it isn't wise to give a lift to a hitch-hiker or to open one's door to a stranger. There are lots of criminals and many violent attacks. What do you think?
4. Jesus doesn't seem to be referring to people with great plans for charity, but to people who are capable of offering spontaneous love. Have you ever come across such a person?
5. Has anyone ever thanked you for something that you had long forgotten? What was it?
6. What do you think of this statement: "God is interested in your well-being. If you are poor, that is your problem, the result of

your sins. Give yourself up to God, who will bless you; everything you give God will be given back to you tenfold, and you will be rich."

7. Discuss the following statement: "All that stuff about loving your neighbour is fine, but in politics it doesn't work that way. You can't do politics like that."
8. What can we do to practise the love that God promises and gives us?



RESISTING MASS PRESSURE

STEP 1

TWO REAL-LIFE STORIES

All the important SACM leaders were at the rally. The time had come for the party leader's speech. He spoke well and everybody was excited. Tony and Julia, two youths from the local church, were also there and they felt quite amazed about what they heard and saw. They joined in the chorus of slogan shouting: "Viva SACM!" Speaker after speaker attacked the opposition SAJP party and this amused the audience. In their speeches, they emphasised that only SACM could guarantee the future of the nation. SAJP is no good at all, they said. Tony and Julia went back to their youth group at the church. They talked about the rally to their friends who burst out laughing at some of the things the politicians had spoken about. Their friends asked a lot of questions: "Do you think things are that easy, that on one side you have good politicians and on the other bad ones?". This irritated Tony and Julia.



No one seems to be able to say what really happened, it was all so quick. It was said that he had been arrested at night. That he had already been judged by the religious authorities and that they were only waiting for the sentence to be confirmed by the governor. A young onlooker is surprised. It is only a week since he saw the man enter the city on a small donkey, and the whole town was overjoyed. Now he hears criticism and people mocking Jesus. They are all standing in front of the governor's palace. The governor himself appears on the verandah of his palace and presents the criminal to the crowd. This criminal is the preacher from Nazareth. The young onlooker does not understand. But everybody starts shouting: "Crucify him!". The young man tries to resist shouting, but eventually joins in. After the "show" he goes home, very excited and with a lot of stories to tell. "They have caught another one. He must be crazy or something." He feels slightly irritated when his mother asks him: "That Jesus is going to be crucified. Do you think it's fair?" (Matthew 27)

LET US REFLECT

We have two cases of people, who in the middle of a crowd, said and did things that afterwards made them question themselves. It is not easy to resist "mass pressure" or "mob psychology."

1. Has it ever happened to you, that when you were in the middle of a crowd, you did things that deep down you hated doing? Discuss.
2. Have you had the opposite experience of resisting "mass pressure"? Explain.
3. Look at these two opposing views and discuss them: (a). We should have political rallies because they strengthen the spirit of unity of our parties and allow the public to be enlightened. (b). The Government should ban all political rallies because they only create chaos and confuse people.
4. Why does it seem easier to do what everyone else does than to adopt one's own stand on issues?

STEP 2

LET US READ THE BIBLE

How can we convince someone of the truth? God chooses strange ways of doing so. In the second part of the book of Isaiah (40-55), we find four poems that talk about a servant of God who must come and teach us about the will of God. We don't know who Isaiah had in mind as he spoke to a people in distress after many years in exile. But the church, since the beginning, has understood this message: "Jesus Christ is this servant of God!" Let's look closely at this promise:

Read Isaiah 42, 1-9

STEP 3

LET US DISCOVER GOD'S MESSAGE FOR US

1. What verse in the above text did you find strange?
2. It can be a tiring experience to try and persuade someone to change an opinion or attitude. The servant of God does not get tired as indicated in verse 4. Can this apply to us as well?
3. Have you ever seen someone acting like this servant of God? When?
4. The servant of God made an agreement to make the blind see and to free the captives. With whom are we in covenant?
5. "In order to have influence, we must spread information about our viewpoint. Our cause must win!" Discuss this opinion.

- 6. Peace in South Africa is very similar to a broken reed or a weak light. God promises not to crush it or blow it out. Have we had experiences of God's faithfulness to this promise?**
- 7. God promises "new things". What new things are you hoping from God for South Africa?**
- 8. We have been called to work with God, to be God's servants. What are we going to do in our lives to carry out this mission?**

STEP 1**TWO REAL-LIFE STORIES**

Dudu came from another village. Now she is a member of the mothers' choir. She sings and speaks well. The pastor suggests that she become the leader of the women's organisation. A good choice. The work is carried out well. But trust is weak because Dudu is not one of our people! One day, a problem arises between Dudu and Sbongile, and Dudu becomes very angry; immediately the gossip starts: "She spoke badly about our sister. She does not deserve to be our leader!" Much is said that is not true. But the pastor realizes that the fire is burning. To avoid worse dangers, he asks Dudu to resign from her post as a leader. The fire is extinguished. But so is the women's work.



Moses had married a woman from Ethiopia, and Miriam and Aaron start criticizing him because of it:

– Do you think that the Eternal God has spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken also through us?

The Eternal hears what they say. Moses was a humble man, the humblest in the whole world. So, immediately, the Lord tells Moses, Aaron and Miriam:

– You three over there, go to the Tent of the Covenant.

In the Tent, God speaks to the three of them. He shows them that the issue of whether God spoke also through Miriam and Aaron, was an excuse for a power struggle. As a sign of the ugliness involved in that rivalry, Miriam is stricken with a horrible skin disease that is only cured through Moses's intervention. (Numbers 12)

LET US REFLECT

Rivalry and power struggle lead to painful divisions within groups or the community. Let's look closely at this issue:

1. People in positions of responsibility in groups or communities are often envied. Can you discuss your own experiences.
2. To be over-ambitious and to be hungry for positions of influence is like a sickness. Have you experienced this and how have you been able to curb rivalry?

3. Discuss this statement: "To avoid confrontation, we should submit to those in positions of influence. This is the will of God."
4. "If anyone has the talent and competence to be a leader they have the right and duty to fight to be able to rule." Discuss.
5. Moses was a great leader, but he is depicted as being "the most humble in the whole world". Do you know of any leaders like Moses?

LET US READ THE BIBLE

The apostle Paul loved the Philippians. He was worried when he found out that there were rivalries which threatened their unity. *Read Philippians 1:27-30 and 2:1-11.*

STEP 3 LET US DISCOVER GOD'S MESSAGE FOR US

1. Which sentence made you think the most? Share it!
2. Jesus "emptied himself", he sought the last place. Many people seek the highest places. Have you found anyone who has done what Jesus did: seeking voluntarily the lowest place? What happened?
3. We desire peace, but the apostle speaks about struggle and conflict. What kind of struggle are we pledged to? Talk about your experiences.
4. "Competition generates progress." This is a rule of "free enterprise". Paul exhorts the Philippians: "Do not do anything for competition." Is there a contradiction? What rule do we apply in the life of our church?
5. The life of our community should show that we are united and that we belong to Jesus Christ who humbled himself and was lifted up. Can we see any visible signs of this?
6. "Each one for themselves and God for us all - that is the law of life. We must fit in." What do you say?
7. "To consider others better than yourself – that is an illusion, in practice it doesn't work and it is no good! We need a certain order and hierarchy." Discuss this opinion.
8. Many people think that suffering is God's punishment for lack of faith. Paul says that it is part of God's service and participation in the struggle (verses 29 and 30). Do you have any examples that will help us understand this?

9. What can we do in reality to experience what we have discovered in this bible study?

SOME NOTES

Verses 6-11, are part of a hymn probably sung by the first Christian communities. We do not know whether Paul is its author or someone else. But Paul mentions it in his letter: let your life be coherent with what you sing in your services!

When Paul writes this letter, he is in prison. That is why he talks about suffering.

STEP 1

TWO REAL-LIFE STORIES

The village is becoming divided. There is enmity and hate amongst people. The chief sees the danger and establishes criteria to discipline any act of vandalism and to protect all the victims, whatever their party. In fact, the old man manages to bring peace back to the village.

But the SAJP wants to reinforce its influence in the village, and sends a new representative to organize a big rally. He speaks against the chief and he urges his followers to “take action” against the SACM sympathisers as well as those of other parties. At the same time he sends a message to the chief offering a high place in his party: “The oldest one in the village must be a member of SAJP. We are going to win!”

But the chief refuses. He does not want to play that game: “I have been with my people for many years. We have already suffered a lot because of violence. If you win, good for you. For now, we have much work to do. Instead of destroying everything, help us!”



The Christians in Corinth are a very lively group but also complicated. There have been divisions in the community. Some are proud to have been evangelized by Paul, while others belong to the group of Apollos, and others say they follow Peter. Each group seeks to have the most power. Some, of course, talk against Paul to win against the “Paulists”, while these seek the support of the apostle to be able to rule over the others. But Paul does not want to get involved in this conflict: he replies to the Corinthians, by using the image of Christ, who while composed of many different members, is only one. “God is not a God of chaos, but of peace”, writes Paul.

(1 Corinthians 14:33)

LET US REFLECT

1. “Those who are not for us, are against us.” This statement can put a lot of pressure on us. It is difficult to resist those who talk like this to make us take their side. Have you experienced this?

Share it with the group.

2. "Christians who take their mission seriously undoubtedly have to belong to some party. To be neutral is an illusion, it is an attempt to run away from responsibilities." What do you think?
3. They want to force the chief and Paul to take sides. They refuse. Do you know of similar cases?
4. "After all a one-party system isn't that bad. At least it avoids the confusion of a multi-party system." Do you agree?
5. "Understanding starts with the effort to 'listen' to what others really have to say." Why is it so difficult?

STEP 2

LET US READ THE BIBLE

We suffer because of our incapacity to make ourselves understood. But the bible tells us a story where even people who were foreigners understood what others were talking about. This story is a promise to us. Let's study it.

Read Acts 2:1-13

STEP 3

LET US DISCOVER GOD'S MESSAGE FOR US

1. Which sentence immediately spoke to you? Share it.
2. Someone sighs: "If only the Holy Spirit were sent to us! It seems that those days are gone!" Is it true?
3. Division, misunderstanding and violent conflict are still common among our people. What are the causes?
4. The miracle of understanding does not come through our own will. It is a gift from God: God enlightens people and makes them willing to go and meet others.
5. "During the election campaign, various parties are competing with each other. All South Africans must vote for the party they think is capable of doing the best job. But that should not be an impediment to listening to what others have to say and even learning from them". What do you think?
6. The followers of Jesus were *together* when the Holy Spirit was poured over them. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of unity. But there are those who say: "The Spirit of God forces us to separate ourselves from those who do not have the true

faith!" Discuss this.

7. God promises and gives us the Spirit of unity. How can God's Spirit help us to be reconciled with people of different views who support different political parties?
8. What suggestions do you have for ending the violence?



UNDERSTANDING ONE ANOTHER

STEP 1

TWO REAL-LIFE STORIES

There is a meeting between church people who supported government-created structures and those who were totally opposed to those structures. In the beginning criticism and suspicion are rife: "You took sides with the oppressor, you are opportunistic". "How could you work together with those who used violence to end apartheid?" But with time they all start realizing that there is something more important: despite their different histories they are brothers and sisters in Christ. In this way, they manage to discuss openly the people's problems and to search for positive solutions. They realize that now is the time to put the past behind them.



Jesus goes through the land of the Samaritans. Jews and Samaritans don't understand each other. The Jews think the Samaritans have abandoned true faith in God; and for the Samaritans the Jews with their Temple in Jerusalem betrayed God's will. Jesus is tired and thirsty. Near a village there is a fountain. Jesus sits next to the well and asks a woman to give him water. The woman is very surprised, and asks: "You are a Jew, how is it that you are asking me, a Samaritan woman, to give you water?" Jesus does not accept prejudices and enmities. He has a conversation with the woman that for her is like a liberation: like fresh water in the desert.

(John 4)

LET US REFLECT

No one could expect that there would be understanding in these two cases. But the people involved managed to speak the "same language". We must take a closer look at this:

1. Has it happened to you – that you are able to arrive at some understanding with people who were your opponents? Discuss.
2. It is rather sad when we cannot make ourselves understood. When there is a barrier between us and others. Have you had this experience?

3. It seems that the "Law of Enmity" that makes us mistrust and despise others is stronger than the "Law of Love" that shows us how to respect others. Why?
4. To arrive at an understanding we need generosity and patience. There are many things that will try to make us give up in our search for reconciliation. Share your experiences.
5. How can we promote political tolerance in our community?

STEP 2

LET US READ THE BIBLE

In a war, the parties involved always want to force people to take their side: "Fight on our side, or you are our enemy!" They also tried to do that to Elisha, the prophet. But he did not join the war. Instead he searched for a way to get closer to peace. Let us see how. *Read II Kings 6:8-23*

STEP 3

LET US DISCOVER GOD'S MESSAGE FOR US

1. Which sentence astonished or surprised you?
2. The Syrians want to kill Elisha because he was blocking their victory over the Israelites. The Israelites think it is Elisha who helps them to defeat the Syrians, but instead he prepares a feast for them. God's servants are an obstacle to party interests; as a result they are often persecuted. Do you know examples of this?
3. Most of the members of a congregation belong to one party, let us say SACM. They start having prayer meetings once a week to ask God to help SACM win the elections. They invite the pastor to participate. How should she/he respond?
4. "God loves all. In the political struggle, God is neutral." Is it really like this?
5. The leaders want victory. The people want peace. Elisha apparently is more respectful of the people's wish than of the leader's. Someone said: "South African leaders, regardless of their political views, are all for peace. The people and the leaders are united in that regard." What do you think?
6. Elisha has the courage to get out of this war logic because he can see and he believes: God is with us and defends us. Do you know of any similar cases?
7. Are there people whom you would not be willing to meet? Tell us about it!
8. What suggestions do you have for building understanding between former enemies?

