



# **We Are Called**

**A Guidebook for  
Band Gatherings**

**North Church 2022**

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# “We Are Called”

## A Guidebook for Band Gatherings

### INTRODUCTION

*“Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble....Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken.”*

— Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, 12b

Ecclesiastes is right. We need others we can trust to lift us up, walk beside us, and call us out. The Spirit works through our friendships to deepen our faith, inspire our hope, and expand our love for God, others, and ourselves.

### What is a Band?

Our spiritual ancestors called these gatherings “bands.” At the beginning of the Methodist movement in England, John Wesley was approached by people who had been moved by his preaching to

help them deepen their faith. He organized them into small groups of five to 10 persons, gave them some simple rules, and told them to meet weekly to support one another in their spiritual growth.

Even today, we still need companions to help us grow in grace. A band is:

***a group of three to five people who are deepening their faith in Christ by sharing and praying with one another each week.***

Inspired by the ancient Methodist practice of mutual spiritual support, a band meeting offers encouragement and exploration through conversation and reflection as we reconnect with one another. Meetings can be held in person or virtually, and are arranged by the groups themselves. However you meet, the Spirit of God will be working through the cord of love you will be braiding in your time together.

### **Goal of a Band**

Persons of all ages, backgrounds, identities, and perspectives can be part of the same band, but there is one common desire they share that makes them a band: holy love. They have a desire to experience God's love in deeper ways, and for that love to inspire and saturate their lives. They do not have all the answers; they make mistakes, and they have doubts. But the one thing that brings them together is the desire to be immersed in the God who is love.

We are created in the image of God, and First John says that "God is love" (4:7). This means two things. One, God's love is embodied in the human

life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and this love is being given to us today through the presence of God's Spirit. Two, when we love one another we are experiencing the presence of God's Spirit.

Our desire to experience this "holy love" is a desire to return to who we were created to be. What Jesus started and what the Spirit continues to do is restore the image of God in us. This loving process fulfills us. There are all sorts of things that happen to us and that we do that distorts or hides God's image in us. Sometimes we replace the desire for holy love with things and relationships that do not fulfill us. Sometimes our desire is misdirected in ways that harm us. But God who is love keeps drawing us back and protecting us until we accept that God has accepted us and conform our habits and thinking to God's life-giving ways we see in Jesus.

This desire for holy love is nothing new. Mystics sought it and poets wrote about it for two millennia. This was the goal of the early Methodists when they met in their band meetings. Many of Charles Wesley's hymns describe this goal of the bands, such as this one:

*"Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven,  
to earth come down;  
fix in us thy humble dwelling;  
all thy faithful mercies crown!  
Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded  
love thou art;  
visit us with thy salvation;  
enter every trembling heart."*

Meeting together for mutual support was a channel through which the Spirit worked to cultivate love for God. Other hymns by Charles Wesley described this process:

*“Help us to help each other, Lord,  
each other’s cross to bear;  
let all their friendly aid afford,  
and feel each other’s care.”*

John Wesley described all this as a dynamic process of grace (divine love). He referred to the desire as “prevenient grace,” and the initial turning toward God and acceptance of God’s loving embrace as “justifying grace,” and the ongoing growth in holy love as “sanctifying grace.” The band meetings and other spiritual practices that foster this process he called “the means of grace.”

### **Spiritual Detoxing**

Reclaiming the insights of our Methodist heritage requires us to be aware of the shadow side of that tradition. Bands and other practices of spiritual formation have produced unintended consequences such as fostering anxiety about one’s faith or shame about one’s identity. In the worst-case scenarios, the pursuit of holiness has been marked by emotional manipulation and legalism. This is toxic spirituality.

At North, we envision the bands to be an aid in our growth in holy love that is inclusive of all people. We express this inclusive reclamation of our Methodism in “The North Declaration.” Here are a

few excerpts:

### ***Repentance***

We believe that repentance is a conscious decision to turn to God and away from harming others and ourselves, and to accept the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression.

We reject harmful acts of repentance such as emotional manipulation, shaming, and conversion therapy that lead people to reject who God created them to be.

### ***Justifying Grace***

We believe that justifying grace is God's unconditional acceptance and forgiveness. It is uniquely expressed to each person who receives it by faith in Christ.

We reject that one must be cisgender, be straight, act straight, or be celibate to receive justifying grace.

### ***Sanctifying Grace***

We believe that sanctifying grace (holiness) is the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit restoring our lives and renewing the world with the love and liberation of God.

We reject any idea of holiness that requires a person to deny or attempt to change their sexual orientation or gender identity to be a whole person in Christ.

To read the full declaration, visit: <https://northchurchindy.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/DeclarationFeb25.pdf>. Or visit the "About Us" page on our website at [northchurchindy.com](http://northchurchindy.com).

You may discover that one of the things that happens in your band meeting is “spiritual detoxing.” It may be necessary for some members of a band to process their past negative experiences of religion so they can experience the genuine, life-giving reality of the Spirit which we call holy love.

### **How Does a Band Work?**

Ideally bands meet weekly. They can meet in person or virtually, but meeting weekly is the best way to establish relationships and reflection. They are small (one writer called them a “micro-community model”) so there is ample time for each person to share within 60 to 90 minutes.

The format is intentionally simple so it can be flexible for the needs of each group. A meeting begins with a centering prayer to help participants become aware of the Spirit’s presence and to declutter one’s mind from the day’s events. This is followed by each person sharing based on two simple questions:

- **How is it with your soul?**
- **How have you seen God at work?**

The questions are designed to help participants become aware of the ways the Spirit has been working in their lives and to cultivate their reception of holy love. Each person is given time to share while the others listen. The other participants do not offer analysis or criticism. When a person shares something that is particularly difficult the others may respond with a simple statement of affirmation



(examples are found in the resources section, “Responses After Sharing,” on page 24).

Following the personal sharing, there is a group discussion about a topic or scripture passage that is helpful for spiritual formation.

The meeting closes with each person being blessed by the other members.

### **The Seven Commitments**

North’s bands are based on “Discipleship Bands: A Practical Field Guide” by Mark Benjamin and J.D. Walt. Like other types of groups, bands function with some basic rules. Benjamin and Walt call these “The Seven Commitments”:

1. Respect the clock. You have 15-20 minutes to share. Please do your best to stick to that time frame.
2. Challenge by choice — You have permission to skip a question at any time.
3. No cross-talk — When someone is sharing, don’t give advice or interrupt.
4. One counselor (come Holy Spirit) — When someone is sharing, listen deeply and pay attention to how the Holy Spirit might prompt you to pray.
5. Comfort with empathy — Hold space for others with open hearts. Rather than offering pity or sympathy, show up and tune in — bless, encourage, and build up.
6. Community of grace — When someone confesses sin, pardon by saying, “In the name of Jesus Christ you are forgiven.” If someone shares a secret, thank them for their courage, and never judge.
7. Strictly confidential — Never share another per-

son's story, struggles, successes, sins, or secrets outside the group.

We will follow these commitments in our band gatherings.

### **Beyond the “We Are Called” Series**

North's band gatherings are a seven-week commitment. This is the optimum time for folks to get to know one another and for deep sharing to take place. If your band decides to end after seven weeks, then celebrate what you experienced and feel good about it. Or, if you want to continue going as a band, we highly recommend you download and use “Discipleship Bands: A Practical Field Guide” by Mark Benjamin and J.D. Walt as your guide.

# Session One: We Are Called To Be Couriers of Joy

(Note: It may be helpful to write the date of each of the seven sessions by its heading in this guidebook.)

## 1. Centering Exercise

Begin with this centering exercise, “Palms Down, Palms Up”:

**Step 1:** Remove as many distractions as possible. Take several slow, deep breaths.

**Step 2:** Hold your hands palms down and envision giving all your burdens to God. Imagine these things falling out of your hands.

**Step 3:** When you can imagine your hands empty, turn your hands palms up and think about what you need from God. Imagine God putting those things in your hands.

**Step 4:** When ready each person ends by saying, “So be it. Amen.”

## 2. Time of Sharing

For this first session spend time getting to know the basics of one another’s stories. Unlike the following sessions, this is a time of free sharing.

Option: Use one of the following questions to prompt the sharing:

- When did you start attending North Church, and what drew you to it?
- What was the religious background of your family when you were growing up?

- How many jobs have you had as an adult?
- Do you have any pets?
- Is there a favorite book, movie, or television show you have read or seen in the past six months?
- What was your favorite and least favorite subjects in school?

### **3. Three “Calling” Questions**

This week’s “We Are Called:” **Couriers of Joy**

Everyone is free to comment on these questions:

- What makes you smile?
- Have you ever imagined what brings God joy?
- How can you bring joy into someone’s life this week?

### **4. Closing Blessing**

Bring this session to an end at the agreed-upon time.

Go around the circle and pray a one-sentence prayer for the person to your right.

Option: After each person has prayed, the group may conclude with a response or unison prayer such as the Lord’s Prayer, or one of the suggested prayers in the “Resources” at the end of this guidebook.

# Session Two: We Are Called To Be Ambassadors of Peace

## 1. Centering Exercise

Begin with the centering exercise “Palms Down, Palms Up” in step one on page nine

Other centering exercises may be used. For additional ideas, see “Resources” at the end of the guidebook.

## 2. Two “Spirit” Questions

Each person takes a turn sharing by responding to these questions:

- How is it with my soul?
- How have I seen God at work?

If a person does not feel comfortable responding to either or both questions, they can choose not to and the next person will share.

## 3. Three “Calling” Questions

This week’s “We Are Called”: **Ambassadors of Peace.**

Everyone is free to comment on these questions:

- What are the features of God’s peace in our hearts and minds? In our relationships? In our community and world?
- Why is it hard to create peace and reconciliation among people?
- In what situations and relationships might God be calling you to be an ambassador of God’s peace for others?

#### **4. Closing Blessing**

Bring this session to an end at the agreed-upon time.

Go around the circle and pray a one-sentence prayer for the person to your right.

Option: After each person has prayed, the group may conclude with a responsive or unison prayer, such as the Lord's Prayer, or one of the suggested prayers in the "Resources" at the end of this guidebook.

# Session Three: We Are Called To Be Laborers of Mercy

## 1. Centering Exercise

Begin with this centering exercise, “Palms Down, Palms Up” you used previously (item one, page nine).

Other centering exercises may be used. For additional ideas, see “Resources” at the end of the guidebook.

## 2. Two “Spirit” Questions

Each person takes a turn sharing by responding to the questions in step two, session two (page 11). If a person doesn’t feel comfortable responding to either or both questions, they can choose not to and the next person will share.

## 3. Three “Calling” Questions

This week’s “We Are Called”: **Laborers of Mercy.**

Everyone is free to comment on these questions:

- When you hear the word “laborer,” what comes to mind? What are the struggles and obstacles of doing acts of mercy?
- How does Jesus’s life and/or teachings inspire you to be a laborer of mercy?
- What is one way you can be a laborer of mercy, either as an individual or through a ministry of the church?

#### **4. Closing Blessing**

Bring this session to an end at the agreed-upon time.

Go around the circle and pray a one-sentence prayer for the person to your right.

Option: After a person has prayed, the group may conclude with a responsive or unison prayer such as the Lord's Prayer or one of the suggested prayers in the "Resources" at the end of this guidebook.



# Session Four: We Are Called To Be Servers of Hope

## 1. Centering Exercise

Begin with this centering exercise, “Palms Down, Palms Up” you used previously (item one, page nine). Other centering exercises may be used. For more ideas, see “Resources” at the end of this guidebook.

## 2. Two “Spirit” Questions

Each person takes a turn sharing by responding to the two basic questions used previously in step two, session two (page 11). If a person doesn’t feel comfortable responding to either or both questions, they can choose not to and the next person will share.

## 3. Three “Calling” Questions

This week’s “We Are Called”: **Servers of Hope.**

Everyone is free to comment on these questions:

- What is happening in the world that makes it hard to see God’s hope?
- How does the Lord’s Supper symbolize God’s greater hope for society?
- How can I participate in God’s hope for the world?

## 4. Closing Blessing

Bring this session to an end at the agreed-

upon time.

Go around the circle and pray a one-sentence prayer for the person to your right.

Option: After a person has prayed, the group may conclude with a responsive or unison prayer such as the Lord's Prayer or one of the suggested prayers in the "Resources" at the end of this guide-book.

# Session Five: We Are Called To Be Creatures of the Earth

## 1. Centering Exercise

Begin with the centering exercise, “Palms Down, Palms Up” (item one, page nine), or an idea from the “Resources” section at the end of the guidebook.

## 2. Two “Spirit” Questions

Each person takes a turn sharing by responding to the two basic questions used previously in step two, session two (page 11).

## 3. Three “Calling” Questions

This week’s “We Are Called”: **Creatures of the Earth**. Everyone is free to comment on these questions:

- How do you experience God in nature?
- How can our encounters with other creatures nurture our faith in our Creator?
- What can we do to honor the goodness of God’s creation?

## 4. Closing Blessing

Bring this session to an end at the agreed-upon time. Go around the circle and pray a one-sentence prayer for the person to your right.

Option: After each person has prayed, the group may conclude with a responsive or unison prayer like the Lord’s Prayer, or one of the prayers from the “Resources” section.

## Notes/Reflections

# Session Six: We Are Called To Be Bearers of Light

## 1. Centering Exercise

Begin with this centering exercise, “Palms Down, Palms Up” (item one, page nine).

## 2. Two “Spirit” Questions

- How is it with my soul?
- How have I seen God at work?

If someone doesn’t feel comfortable sharing, he or she can choose not to and the next person will share.

## 3. Three “Calling” Questions

This week’s “We Are Called”: **Bearer of Light.**

Everyone is free to comment on these questions:

- Have you ever thought of your occupation as a divine calling?
- What does it mean to have integrity in the workplace?
- How can you live out your faith at work so others will see Christ in you?

## 4. Closing Blessing

Bring this session to an end at the agreed-upon time. Go around the circle and pray a one-sentence prayer for the person to your right.

Option: After each person has prayed, the group may conclude with the Lord’s Prayer.

## Notes/Reflections

# Session Seven: We Are Called To Be Midwives of Faith

## 1. Centering Exercise

Begin with this centering exercise, “Palms Down, Palms Up” (item one, page nine).

## 2. Two “Spirit” Questions

- How is it with my soul?
- How have I seen God at work?

If someone doesn’t feel comfortable sharing, he or she can choose not to and the next person will share.

## 3. Three “Calling” Questions

This week’s “We Are Called’: **Midwives of Faith**

Everyone is free to comment on these questions:

- Who helped you develop your faith?
- What does the image of a midwife bring to mind?
- How can you be a midwife of faith development for a relative or friend?

## 4. Closing Blessing

Bring this session to an end at the agreed-upon time. Go around the circle and pray a one-sentence prayer for the person to your right.

Option: Afterwards, the group may conclude with a responsive or unison prayer such as the Lord’s Prayer or a prayer from the “Resources” section at the end of this guidebook.

## Notes/Reflections



# Resources

## 1. Alternative Centering Exercises

### Hymn or Song of Reflection

Select a hymn or a song to be read, sung, or listened to as you center your hearts and minds in the Holy Spirit. There are several ways this can be done:

- Read the hymn or song, pausing after each verse for silence.
- Sing or listen to a hymn or song and at the end allow for a time of silence for the music to resonate in your hearts and minds.

### Psalm Reflection

As with a hymn, the same can be done with a psalm. Most Bibles show breaks between the major sections in a psalm. Use these breaks as a pause for silence.

### Light the Christ Candle

**Step 1:** As you begin, place a candle in the center of your group and light it. Invite everyone to sit in a comfortable position.

**Step 2:** Begin by quieting your mind from other thoughts as you begin breathing in a slow rhythm.

**Step 3:** Focus on the object or image as you slowly become aware of the presence of God.

**Step 4:** As you end, sit quietly and take time to refocus on your surroundings. You may want to close with a prayer, such as the Lord's Prayer.

## **Prayer for Illumination**

Most bulletins for Sunday worship include a prayer for illumination that is read in unison. You can use this prayer as part of your centering exercise.

**Step 1:** Invite everyone to sit comfortably, take several slow breaths, and enter into a moment of silence.

**Step 2:** One person brings this time of silence to an end by reading the prayer for illumination, or a designated person can bring the time of silence to an end by saying “Amen.” Then, everyone read the prayer in unison.

## **2. Responses After Sharing “Two” Spirit Questions:**

- If someone needs assurance: “You are the beloved child of God.”
- If someone shares a burden: “We see you; we hear you, we love you.”
- If someone confesses a sin: “In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.”

## **3. Suggested Closing Prayers**

### **The Lord’s Prayer**

The Lord’s Prayer is a standard way to conclude a time of prayer. In addition to reciting the traditional version, you may be interested in trying one of these alternatives:

Leader: Let us pray as Jesus taught us:

**People: Our Father in heaven, holy is your name.**

Leader: Your reign will come. Your will be done.

**People: On earth as in heaven.**

Leader: Give us bread for today.

**People: For yours is the realm, the strength, and the majesty.**

Leader: Forgive our sins as we forgive others.

**People: For yours is the realm, the strength, and the majesty.**

Leader: Remove that which tempts us.

**People: For yours is the realm, the strength, and the majesty.**

Leader: Liberate us from evil.

**People: For yours is the realm, the strength, and the majesty.**

Leader: Amen.

**(from "A New Zealand Prayer Book")**

Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, pain-bearer, life-giver,  
source of all that is and that shall be,

Father and Mother of us all,

Loving God, in whom is heaven:

The hallowing of your name echo through the uni-  
verse!

The way of your justice be followed by the peoples  
of the world!

Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!

Your commonwealth of peace and freedom  
sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.

In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive  
us.

In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.

From trials too great to endure, spare us.

From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you reign in the glory of the power that is love,  
now and forever. Amen.

### **Prayer of John Chrysostom**

(This prayer is attributed to the fourth-century archbishop of Constantinople and has been traditionally used as a conclusion to prayer of intercession.)

Almighty God,  
you have given us the unity of grace  
to bring our prayers to you in this hour,  
and you have promised through your beloved Son  
that when two or three are gathered together in his  
name you will be among them:  
Fulfill now, O Lord, our desires and requests  
as may be best for us.  
In this world, grant us knowledge of your truth  
and everlasting life in the age to come. Amen.

### **Prayer of St. Francis**

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace;  
where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
and where there is sadness, joy.  
O Divine Master,  
Grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood, as to understand;

to be loved, as to love;  
for it is in giving that we receive,  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

### **Various Blessings**

May the Spirit of the Risen Christ  
empower you to do justice,  
inspire you to love kindness,  
and illumine the way to walk humbly with God,  
this day and all days. Amen.

May the eternal abundance of God the Giver, the  
Gift and the Giving  
keep fulfilling you as you are emptied  
in loving service to the world,  
to the glory of Christ Jesus. Amen.

On our heads and our houses, the blessing of God.  
In our coming and going, the peace of God.  
In our life and believing, the love of God.  
At our end and new beginning,  
the arms of God to welcome us and bring us home.  
Amen.

### **Caim Prayer**

Caim or “encircling” prayer comes from the Celtic  
tradition and can be adapted for many different sit-  
uations for the person who is being prayed for. The  
invisible circle symbolizes the love of God encircling  
the person.  
For each person,

**Step 1:** With your finger, draw a circle around them or stretch out your hands to symbolize they are being encircled by God.

**Step 2:** God, circle (name), keep peace within and keep fears out. Amen.

**“Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble...Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken.”**

**— Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, 12b**



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