

FINDING PEACE IN AN ANXIOUS WORLD

Companion Study
Guide for Individuals
and Small Groups

Olivia DiAgostino



*Finding Peace in an Anxious World: Companion Study Guide
for Individuals and Small Groups*

by Olivia DiAgostino

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United Methodist Women,
475 Riverside Drive, 15th floor,
New York, NY 10115

unitedmethodistwomen.org

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United Methodist Women Purpose

The organized unit of United Methodist Women shall be a community of women whose purpose is to know God and to experience freedom as whole persons through Jesus Christ; to develop a creative, supportive fellowship; and to expand concepts of mission through participation in the global ministries of the church.

The Vision

Turning faith, hope and love into action on behalf of women, children and youth around the world.

Living the Vision

We provide opportunities and resources to grow spiritually, become more deeply rooted in Christ and put faith into action.

We are organized for growth, with flexible structures leading to effective witness and action.

We equip women and girls around the world to be leaders in communities, agencies, workplaces, governments and churches.

We work for justice through compassionate service and advocacy to change unfair policies and systems.

We provide educational experiences that lead to personal change in order to transform the world.

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Introduction

Welcome to *Finding Peace in an Anxious World*. Co-written by a team of pastors at Urban Village Church, a United Methodist-affiliated church plant in Chicago, this study is designed to explore the ways in which spiritual disciplines can help combat the anxieties that plague us every day. While this resource was originally created for use at conference Mission u events, it has been adapted for individual participants and small-group settings.

Using “The Serenity Prayer” as a guide, in this study we will explore ways to discover peace through scriptural and spiritual disciplines so that we can be rooted in God and energized to live fully as disciples of Christ—even in anxious times.

This resource is designed to be used either individually or in virtual small-group settings as a companion to *Finding Peace in an Anxious World*. Each study session is flexible and designed to take 60–75 minutes.

There are two short videos included in each session:

- one that frames some of the theological concepts included in each chapter and
- one that is an overview of the chapter as a whole.

These can be used in a few different ways to enhance your exploration of this material. If you are participating in the study as a group, you may want to watch both videos before beginning the session to gain additional insight into the chapter. Alternatively, you may want to watch the theological framing video ahead of time and watch the chapter overview together as a group. As you dig in to this study, evaluate what is helpful for you and your group: videos and activities can be adapted, customized, or skipped to fit your needs.

If leading a group online using a videoconferencing platform is new to you, this document may be helpful: unitedmethodistwomen.org/Media/PDF/DistanceProgrammingResources.pdf. Some beneficial practices include signing on to the platform 15 minutes early to help anyone who may be having technical difficulties (consider sharing your phone number, too, so participants can text or call you for assistance if necessary), beginning each session with a brief overview of where to find important controls such as mute or chat, and having a host or co-leader who can manage the technological aspects of the session.

What you will need:

- *Finding Peace in an Anxious World*, available at umwmissionresources.org.
- New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, unless otherwise noted
- Computer with internet connection for playing videos and background music for small groups; individuals can use whatever device they prefer
- A journal or notepaper

For those doing the study as a group, each journaling prompt can become a topic of discussion. In the interest of time, you may wish to ask participants to read through each session ahead of time and then choose two to three questions to discuss more thoroughly during your group meeting.

A list of additional resources for participants called “Digging Deeper” is found at the end of the book, along with an Appendix containing handouts and templates needed for the sessions.

Note: This study deals heavily with anxiety, that common emotional response that many experience daily in reaction to adverse events. It is not meant to combat clinical anxiety, a medical condition that is best addressed by doctors and therapists. The spiritual techniques suggested here may help to alleviate anxious feelings, but they should not be regarded as treatment for clinical anxiety. It is important for both leaders and participants to be aware of this distinction.

SESSION 1:

God, grant me the serenity

Before You Begin

Read the Introduction and Chapter 1 of *Finding Peace in an Anxious World*.

Watch the video: “Theological Frameworks in Chapter 1: Serenity,”

bit.ly/Chapter1SerenityFrameworks (8-9 minutes).

Optional: Read or review the book of Proverbs. There are thirty-one chapters, so this book lends itself well to reading one chapter a day for a month during your devotional time.

Getting Started

Watch the video: “Overview of Chapter 1: Serenity,”

bit.ly/Chapter1SerenityOverview (4–5 minutes).

Centering

Take a few moments to center yourself and prepare to explore this study. Consider the ways in which our space can reflect our search for serenity and inner peace. If possible, find a calming space to engage in the study, play soothing music, or light a candle. Read the scripture below slowly:

Blessed are those who find wisdom,
those who gain understanding,
for she is more profitable than silver
and yields better returns than gold.
She is more precious than rubies;
nothing you desire can compare with her.
Long life is in her right hand;
in her left hand are riches and honor.
Her ways are pleasant ways,
and all her paths are peace.
She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her;
those who hold her fast will be blessed.
—Proverbs 3:13–18

Throughout Proverbs, Wisdom (*hokma* in Hebrew and *sofia* in Greek) is personified as a woman. She “cries out in the street” (Proverbs 1:20) and says, “Hear, for I will speak noble things” (Proverbs 8:6). In Proverbs 8, Wisdom tells the reader that she was created “at the first, before the beginning of the earth” (verse 23), and that she was present with the Lord at creation: “I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight” (verse 30).

How does this biblical characterization help you to think about what it means to have wisdom?

Creating Covenant Community

If you are participating in a small-group study, participants may create a group covenant that will serve to establish behaviors and norms in the group space. The process of creating a community covenant will ensure that participants are familiar with what they expect from each other, and it will also serve as a guideline that you can return to if discussion becomes harmful or inappropriate. Some rules that are commonly used for class covenants are below. After creating your group covenant, ask all participants to indicate that they are comfortable with the final result.

Common guidelines for a class covenant:

- Listen first: Focus on truly hearing what your sister is saying rather than immediately thinking of a response.
- Step up/step back: Pay attention to whose voices are being heard. If you find yourself speaking several times in a session, consider stepping back; on the other hand, if you are a more reserved person consider whether you should “step up” and share something that may be helpful for the group.
- Confidentiality: Don’t share personal stories outside the group without consent.

Anxiety in Scripture

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day’s journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

—Luke 2:41–52

Read Luke 2:41–52 aloud. Imagine what Mary and Joseph must have felt! It has been three whole days since Mary or Joseph has seen Jesus. Three whole days of searching and he has not been found! As his parent, what does their internal dialogue sound like? What might you say to yourself as a parent? What do you think the community thinks of you? What about little Jesus do you worry about?

Reflect and journal on the perspective of Mary and Joseph as they react to the fact that their child is missing. What does worry or anxiety look like in this biblical passage?

Defining Anxiety and Serenity

What is a time when you have felt anxious?

In your journal or in the space below, reflect on what anxiety is like for you. What does it taste like? Feel like? Look like? Sound like?

Anxiety

Now do the same for serenity. What does it feel like? How do you experience it with all of your senses?

Serenity
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No matter how we experience anxiety—if we are medically beset by constant worry or occasionally disquieted—there are things we can do to ease anxiety’s power over us. There is therapy, medication, and treatment with doctors. Reflecting on our personal and family history of anxiety can also help us to recognize patterns in what triggers us and help us reduce or change those patterns in our lives.

There are also numerous everyday acts of reflection and peace, as well as the opportunity to cultivate a greater intimacy with the wisdom of scripture and our belovedness in God. These help us to put our anxiety in perspective and seek a greater measure of the serenity that so many of us are seeking. They also have the added benefit of offering spiritual centeredness and growth that can help us in every area of our life. That process and these acts are what this book is all about (*Finding Peace in an Anxious World*, page 20).

Putting the Prayer in Context

When the leadership of Urban Village Church in Chicago first began to work with Proverbs and “The Serenity Prayer”—the work that eventually became a sermon series and later inspired this mission study—their community was facing an anxious time, preparing to begin a new school year amidst news of increasing violence, racism, and white supremacy.

One reason they chose to work with “The Serenity Prayer” is that Urban Village Church has been a congregation committed to seeking justice in times of uncertainty—not unlike the times in which theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote (and rewrote) this prayer, against the backdrop of World War I and World War II, and the Great Depression.¹

Though there are longer versions of “The Serenity Prayer” in existence, this study centers around the commonly known short version, below:

*God, Grant me the Serenity
To accept the things I cannot change
Courage to change the things I can
And the Wisdom to know the difference²*

Now, in 2020, the world is again facing great uncertainty and anxiety. The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated communities around the globe and taken many lives; quotidian errands such as buying groceries are now fraught with precautions and anxieties; many are facing economic uncertainty alongside fear of illness. The impact of the pandemic on older people and communities of color has been particularly devastating.³ In late May and June, after George Floyd and Breonna Taylor were killed by police, protests demanding justice and calling for police reform have swept the United States. The 2020 presidential election is quickly approaching, while in the United Methodist Church, General Conference 2020 has been delayed by more than a year.

The longer version of “The Serenity Prayer,” as recorded by Niebuhr’s daughter Elisabeth Sifton, reads:

*God, grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change;
Courage to change the things I can;
And the wisdom to know the difference.*

*Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world
As it is, not as I would have it;*

*Trusting that He will make all things right
If I surrender to His Will;
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life
And supremely happy with Him
Forever and ever in the next.
Amen.⁴*

This fuller version of the prayer asserts that God is working toward justice in this world, even when it does not feel that way. It does not deny that anxiety exists or that it is powerful, but instead encourages humans to place our trust in God. This is a prayer for times of uncertainty, for feelings of anxiety, for moments of fear; it is both a soothing balm and a weapon of resistance. Niebuhr, writing in a world at war, reminds us to trust in God’s power to work toward good in a place filled with chaos – and encourages us to participate in that good work for God’s kingdom.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

Have you had experience with “The Serenity Prayer” before? How might it help shape your response to anxiety?

How does prayer shape your response to anxiety? What about community?

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One spiritual tool that the authors suggest is breath prayer, detailed on pages 27–28 of the study text. “Finding a phrase to breathe in and out can focus your mind, while breathing intentionally puts you in touch with the rhythms of your body,” the study reads (page 28).

Here’s how we can practice breath prayer:

1. Choose one word or phrase from “The Serenity Prayer” to pray with (for example, “courage” or “living one day at a time”).
2. Slowly focus mind, body, and spirit as you breathe in and out, repeating the word or phrase that you chose in Step 1 with each breath. Do this for at least one minute.

How did you experience this prayer? What did it feel like?

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Spiritual Practice: The Examen

The Examen is another spiritual tool that may be helpful in combating anxiety. Created by St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order, in the sixteenth century, it is a daily review of our lives and how God is present to us throughout the day. Pray through the prompts on the Examen card (see Appendix), spending at least a minute on each step before moving to the next one.

Questions for reflection or discussion:

Pause and reflect on this practice. What was it like? Is it something you might incorporate into your prayer life?

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Endnotes

1. Elisabeth Sifton, *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003).
2. William V. Pietsch, *The Serenity Prayer Book* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1992), 3.
3. [cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html)
4. Sifton, *The Serenity Prayer*.

SESSION 2:

To accept the things I cannot change

Before You Begin

Read Chapter 2 of *Finding Peace in an Anxious World*.

Watch the video: “Theological Frameworks in Chapter 2: Acceptance,”

bit.ly/Chapter2AcceptanceFrameworks (8-9 minutes).

Suggested background music: “It Is Well with My Soul” or “Be Thou My Vision” (search online for “Audrey Assad” plus title of song). For groups, play this as participants join the session.

Gather art materials to illustrate God’s path, such as colored pens or pencils; stickers; magazines; scissors, and glue.

Getting Started

Watch the video: “Overview of Chapter 2: Acceptance,”

bit.ly/Chapter2AcceptanceOverview (4–5 minutes).

Opening Prayer

Constant God, you who never change, morning through night, season upon season, from time before and forever after, help us who are always being called to be transformed and become more like you. Help us to be infused with your light so that we can be points of light in and for this world. Amen.

—*United Methodist Women Bible*, page 18

Studying Proverbs

This video from the Bible Project provides a succinct overview of the book of Proverbs: youtube.com/watch?v=AzmYV8GNAIM&feature=youtu.be (8:07 minutes). After you watch it, reflect on these verses:

Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you;
bind them around your neck,
write them on the tablet of your heart.

So you will find favor and good repute
in the sight of God and of people.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.

In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.

Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.

It will be a healing for your flesh
and a refreshment for your body.

—Proverbs 3:3–8

This proverb suggests that loyalty and faithfulness should be bound around our necks, written on our hearts. It brings to mind this well-known passage, Deuteronomy 6:4–9:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The authors of the study text emphasize the everyday wisdom of proverbs, imagining them written by common-sense ordinary folk and passed down through the generations. What piece of wisdom, or proverb, do you have written on your heart? How was it taught to you? Perhaps a parent or mentor passed down a particular word of wisdom and it has stayed with you throughout your life.

What proverb is written on your heart?

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What Is Acceptance?

Reread the selection from the study text below:

One night, my five-year-old daughter and I were on an evening walk. We walked in silence but were surrounded by the sights and sounds of nature, lightning bugs beginning to signal one another, cicadas rhythmically chanting, and the rustling of leaves. Of course I didn't notice any of this because I was lost in my thoughts about a future worry that some might call anxiety. "Mama," Ruby broke the silence. "Sometimes when I have too many ideas in my head, I listen to the cicadas and it calms me down."

Orienting ourselves toward something bigger than us—the sounds of God's creation, the numerous stars in the sky, a never-ending view of the ocean—can ground us and remind us that God is to be feared. It may seem strange to use the word fear when talking about reducing anxiety, since one definition of fear is to feel anxiety or apprehension on behalf of something. But fear is the word that we find in scripture, so instead of throwing it out let's reclaim it for its intended meaning. To fear the Lord means to have great awe and

reverence. It is an act of worship to fear God. It reminds us that human wisdom and knowledge is really only a gift from God—the source of all wisdom and knowledge.
(*Finding Peace in an Anxious World*, 42–43)

Questions for reflection or discussion:

What does little Ruby see (or not see) in this moment? What does the author see (or not see)?
What message on acceptance does this story offer us?

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Then, choose one of the quotes found in the Appendix, all from Chapter 2 of *Finding Peace in an Anxious World*.

How does this quote inform the ways we think about acceptance? How might it connect to the story about Ruby and the cicadas? Do you agree with the quote that you chose?

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From Contemplation to Action

Proverbs frequently mentions following God’s path. In Chapter 2, the author, Brittany Isaac, identifies several steps on that path. The first step is moving from a place of anxiety to acceptance. Part of arriving at acceptance means to accept the call of God to work for justice and righteousness. Then, we must also continue on the path from acceptance to courage. Let’s take a moment and visualize that path.

Create a visual representation of what it looks like to follow God’s path, from anxiety to acceptance to courage, using the template found in the Appendix. Be as creative as you like, adding pictures and symbols as well as words.

Questions for reflection or discussion:

- What does God’s path look like?
- How do we travel this path?
- What do we bring with us in our “spiritual tool kit”—what spiritual practices or items accompany us on this journey?
- What challenges do we encounter on this path? What challenges us as we move from one step to the next?
- What does it mean to not just passively accept things as they are, but to instead accept the call of God to kin-dom work? (*Please note the use of “kin-dom” in place of the traditional “kingdom.”*¹)

Spiritual Practice: The Welcoming Prayer

The practice of Welcoming Prayer is described on pages 46–47 of *Finding Peace in an Anxious World*.

Here is a summary of the three stages of the Welcoming Prayer:

1. **Focus, Feel, Sink In:** Become aware of whatever is happening in your body and your soul. Sink in to truly allow and accept what you are feeling and experiencing, without judgment or attempting to change it. Notice deeply and with God.
2. **Welcome and Name:** Whatever you find, welcome it in words spoken or unspoken, even if it’s something you find challenging. “Welcome, fear” or “Welcome, pain” or “Welcome, confusion” would all be fitting words of welcome. Fit it to whatever truth you are experiencing at the moment.
3. **Let Go and Let God:** Once you have felt, welcomed, and named the experience you are having, begin to release it in whatever ways are possible. Release yourself physically and emotionally. It can also help to use words of release to ease yourself out of the prayerful experience. Some recommendations include “I let go of the desire for security, affection, control” and “I let go of the desire to change what I am experiencing.”²

Use the “Questions for Small Groups” at the end of Chapter 2 to review how this practice felt for you.

Closing Prayer

Eternal God, grant us peace in this anxious world. May we trust in you with all of our hearts, and may you bring us insight and refreshment. Help us to practice Christian acceptance of the things we cannot change—and give us the courage to take action when we are called to act. Your ways are ways of righteousness, justice, and equity. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Endnotes

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1. The term “kin-dom” was first coined by Ada María Isasi-Díaz. It emphasizes relationality, community, and equity as the basis of God’s reign—just as in Proverbs 2:9.
 2. “The Welcoming Practice,” *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*, accessed June 12, 2019, wisdomwayofknowing.org/resource-directory/the-welcoming-practice.

SESSION 3:

Courage to change the things I can

Before You Begin

Read Chapter 3 of *Finding Peace in an Anxious World* and watch “The Power of Vulnerability,” a TED Talk by Brené Brown (search online for “Brene Brown Ted Talk”).

Watch the video: “Theological Frameworks in Chapter 3: Courage,” bit.ly/Chapter3CourageFrameworks (8-9 minutes).

Background music: “I’m Gonna Live So God Can Use Me” (available at youtube.com/watch?v=NNlZcw4cfYY). For groups, play this as participants join the session.

Getting Started

Watch the video: “Overview of Chapter 3: Courage,” bit.ly/Chapter3CourageOverview (4–5 minutes).

Centering

How good it is to center down!
To sit quietly and see one’s self pass by!

These wise words from Christian theologian and mystic Howard Thurman remind us of the importance of connecting with God through prayer, as does the following passage from Proverbs:

My child, be attentive to my words;
incline your ear to my sayings.
Do not let them escape from your sight;
keep them within your heart.
For they are life to those who find them,
and healing to all their flesh.
—Proverbs 4:20–22

Opening Prayer

God who gives life to all, be with all those who continue to study your wisdom. Prepare our hearts and minds to work together with each other. Give us courage as we continue to do the holy work of learning. How good it is to center down, and to spend time with you! Amen.

Exploring Courage in the Bible

Read Matthew 14:22–29 aloud. You may want to do this more than once.

Questions for reflection or discussion:

Then, spend some time reflecting on the following questions:

- What word or phrase stood out to you?

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- Did anything inspire you? Trouble you?

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- What does this story tell us about courage?

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- Does this remind you of any other stories of courage or faithfulness? (These can be biblical, historical, or personal examples.)

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Vulnerability and Courage

On page 50 of the study text, author Christian Coon refers to the work of psychologist Harriett Lerner. Read the section titled “Anxiety and How We Function” (pages 50–52).

Questions for reflection or discussion:

Consider the following questions:

- Does either of these descriptions (overfunctioner or underfunctioner) resonate with you?

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- When have you seen these characteristics in yourself? In others?

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- Can you see how each of these types has room to grow? How so?

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In this chapter, Coon discusses how courage is a necessary part of growth, even though it is not easy. Read the section in the study text titled “What Is Courage” (pages 52–54). Then, consider Brené Brown’s TED Talk about the power of vulnerability.

Questions for reflection or discussion:

Here are a few questions to jumpstart discussion or reflection:

- What did you think of this TED Talk?

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- In the study text, the author of Chapter 3 quotes from one of Brown’s books: “Heroics is important and we certainly need heroes, but I think we’ve lost touch with the idea that speaking honestly and openly about who we are, about what we’re feeling, and about our experiences (good and bad) is the definition of courage. Heroics is often about putting our life on the line. Ordinary courage is about putting our vulnerability on the line. In today’s world, that’s pretty extraordinary.”¹ Do you agree with her definition of courage? Is there anything you would add?

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- What connections do you see between Brown’s research on vulnerability and the idea of Christian courage?

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- Do you see any connections between this conversation and the earlier Bible passage from Matthew?

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Exploring Christian Courage

Take a few minutes to reflect on what Christian courage looks like, using the discussion about it on pages 54–66 in *Finding Peace in an Anxious World*, Matthew 14:22–23 and Proverbs 4:26–27 as starting points.

Questions for reflection or discussion:

What is God calling us to have the courage to address? How do we, like Peter, find the courage to follow Jesus onto the water?

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Spiritual Practice: Kataphatic Prayer

Another way of praying described in the study text is kataphatic prayer (see pages 66–67). This type of prayer explores language and various ways of approaching God. We'll use the example in the book for this exercise. Listen to each statement, and spend about a minute reflecting on what it means. There are three statements in this example.

God is mother. (*Pause*)

God is not mother. (*Pause*)

God is not *not* mother. (*Pause*)

Amen.

How did you experience that practice? You can pray this prayer with any name for God, or any attribute of God—such as Spirit, Abba, Creator, or Redeemer.

Endnotes

1. Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, MN: Hazeldon, 2010), 12–13.

SESSION 4:

And the wisdom to know the difference

Before You Begin

Read chapter 4 in *Finding Peace in an Anxious World*.

Watch the video: “Theological Frameworks in Chapter 4: Wisdom,”

bit.ly/Chapter4WisdomFrameworks (8-9 minutes).

Note for small groups: A 10-minute labyrinth walk is included in this session. If this poses any planning difficulties, make sure to ask participants to do the activity before the session so you can discuss the experience during your time together.

Getting Started

Watch the video: “Overview of Chapter 4: Wisdom,”

bit.ly/Chapter4WisdomOverview (4–5 minutes).

Spiritual Practice: Body Prayer

Let’s spend some time centering in our bodies with this opening ritual. Begin by sitting or standing in a comfortable position, with feet about shoulder width apart and hands at your sides.

Holy God, you call us to lives of courage and wisdom, not lives of anxiety.

(Raise both arms above your head.)

We raise our hands high, because you ask us to work with willing hands.

(Stretch your hands out in front of you, palms up.)

We stretch our hands in front of us, because you call us to reach out to those in need.

(Bring your hands to your brow, above your eyes, as if searching the distance.)

We bring our hands to our brow, that we may face the future without fear.

(Slowly bring your hands to your chest, pressed together in the traditional prayer pose.)

We move to a posture of centering prayer, because we ask for your wisdom.

Amen.

(Text inspired by Proverbs 31.)

Questions for reflection or discussion:

Spend a few moments reflecting on that prayer experience. Note that anxiety and wisdom, as well as other qualities that we have discussed in this study, often manifest in the body. What do they feel like? What does it feel like to embody prayer, rather than anxiety?

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What Is Wisdom?

As Emily McGinley, the author of Chapter 4, notes, wisdom is a multifaceted quality. It is not simply gathering information: “. . . while knowledge and wisdom are close cousins, they are not one and the same. Knowledge—even knowledge about ourselves—is information, at its base level. It is information derived through learning, experiencing, listening, or observing. Knowledge can be accumulated, stacked, and measured, and give us the things we need to make educated decisions. However, knowledge alone is not enough; it must be shepherded carefully and thoughtfully” (page 73).

Knowledge, intelligence, and logic are all part of wisdom, but wisdom is more than any of these things. “We are limited in our understanding and knowledge and experience,” the author writes. “Knowledge, intelligence, and logic are important. But there is still something missing that keeps it from passing into the realm of wisdom: morals and compassion. As followers of Jesus, we call this Christian wisdom” (page 73).

Questions for reflection or discussion:

Think about a time you have sought, or helped someone seek, Christian wisdom. What was that process like? (If you are in a small group, invite participants to share.)

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Wisdom and the Christian Life

Reread Proverbs 2:1–11. Then read the paragraph from the study text on page 78 that begins “Wisdom exists in a four-fold tension.”

These are the tensions that are present in biblical wisdom, which the author discusses in detail in the study text (pages 78–82):

1. Christians work for wisdom, but it is God who grants wisdom.
2. Christians build a tolerance for disappointment but maintain determined hope.
3. Wisdom is a practice in which we participate, but it is a gift granted by God.
4. Wisdom does not do away with anxiety but provides tools to manage anxiety.

Questions for reflection or discussion:

Consider these four statements alongside Proverbs 2:1–11. Do you agree with these statements? What does each one say about wise living?

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Labyrinth Meditation

You will need the finger labyrinth found in the Appendix or a floor labyrinth, if you have access to one.

Review the “Labyrinth Meditation for Individuals” on pages 84–85 of the study text, where McGinley discusses “trustful wayfinding.” Spend at least 10 minutes tracing or walking the labyrinth.

Questions for reflection or discussion:

- What was this experience of prayer like?

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- How did this experience resonate or not resonate with your understanding of prayer?

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In a time when walking outdoors may be one of the few activities available to you outside of the house, you may also want to explore walking meditation as a spiritual practice. Read more about walking meditation at: upperroom.org/resources/walking-prayer.

Review and Moving to Action

During this study, we explored a variety of spiritual practices that can be used to help combat anxiety and rest in God's peace:

- Breath prayer
- The Examen
- Praising in song
- Welcoming prayer
- Kataphatic prayer
- Body prayer
- Labyrinth walking/walking meditation

Questions for reflection or discussion:

Which of these resonated the most for you?

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What other spiritual "tools" or practices do you use during prayer?

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Return to "The Serenity Prayer." Read it aloud and spend a few minutes in reflection.

*God, Grant me the Serenity
To accept the things I cannot change
Courage to change the things I can
And the Wisdom to know the difference¹*

Do you look at the prayer any differently, now that you have examined it so closely?

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What challenged or surprised you most about the prayer?

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Lastly, take a moment to consider what “next steps” may be for you. Ask yourself:

- What prayer practice will I undertake?

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- What action is God calling me to do, here and now, for the transformation of the world?

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- What will be my “next most faithful step” in following God’s call?

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Closing Prayer

Sometimes we are anxious, God. We long for your peace. Grant us wisdom.

We ask that we might have the serenity of Jesus when he was in the temple, knowing that he was in his Father’s house.

We know that we can place our trust in you, even when it is difficult. Help us to practice acceptance, God, and we also ask for courage, knowing that we will be called to act.

May we go forth with the power of your Spirit, ready to work for justice, ready to put faith, hope and love into action.

Amen.

Endnotes

1. William V. Pietsch, *The Serenity Prayer Book* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1992), 3.

Additional Resources: Digging Deeping

Want to dig deeper into the concepts and spiritual practices presented in this study book?

- Try the “Guided Meditation” on page 22 of *Managing Anxiety: A Youth Study* (United Methodist Women, 2020; available at <https://www.umwmissionresources.org>).
- Explore an additional resource on the Breath Prayer: gravitycenter.com/practice/breath-prayer.
- Creating and coloring can be a form of relaxation for many people. The book *Inspire Proverbs: Coloring and Creative Journaling Through Proverbs* (Tyndale House Publishing, 2017; available at Cokesbury.com) may be of particular interest.
- Explore the Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT), “A Tool to Manage Anxiety,” on pages 28–29 of *Managing Anxiety: A Youth Study* (United Methodist Women, 2020; available at missionresources.org).

Connect with United Methodist Women via:

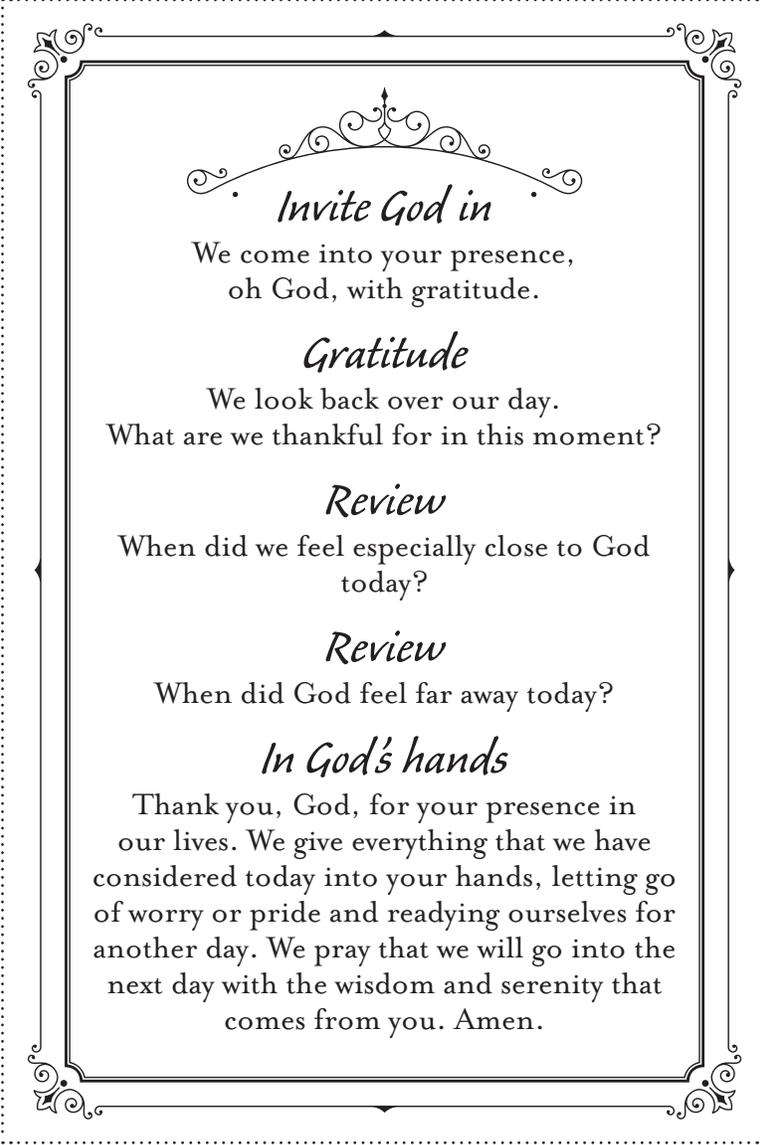
- Facebook: facebook.com/UMWomen
- Twitter: twitter.com/UMWomen
- Instagram: instagram.com/umwomen

And explore the following United Methodist Women resources:

- Follow our Faith Talks podcast (unitedmethodistwomen.org/faithtalks) to hear brave discussions by bold women leaders. The session on anxiety not only discusses the disorder—you will also hear from experts who share helpful resources: speaker.com/user/unitedmethodistwomen/emotion-anxiety
- The Reading Program is a cherished United Methodist Women tradition that brings together members in mission as they explore, share and discuss the books. Reading Program books are divided into five categories and are available for people of all ages and reading levels. To participate, select one of the four plans and start reading! From captivating novels and heartfelt biographies to urgent messages about issues such as climate change and mass incarceration, there’s something for everyone. Visit unitedmethodistwomen.org/readingprogram.

Appendix: Study Handouts

Session 1: Examen Card



Invite God in

We come into your presence,
oh God, with gratitude.

Gratitude

We look back over our day.
What are we thankful for in this moment?

Review

When did we feel especially close to God
today?

Review

When did God feel far away today?

In God's hands

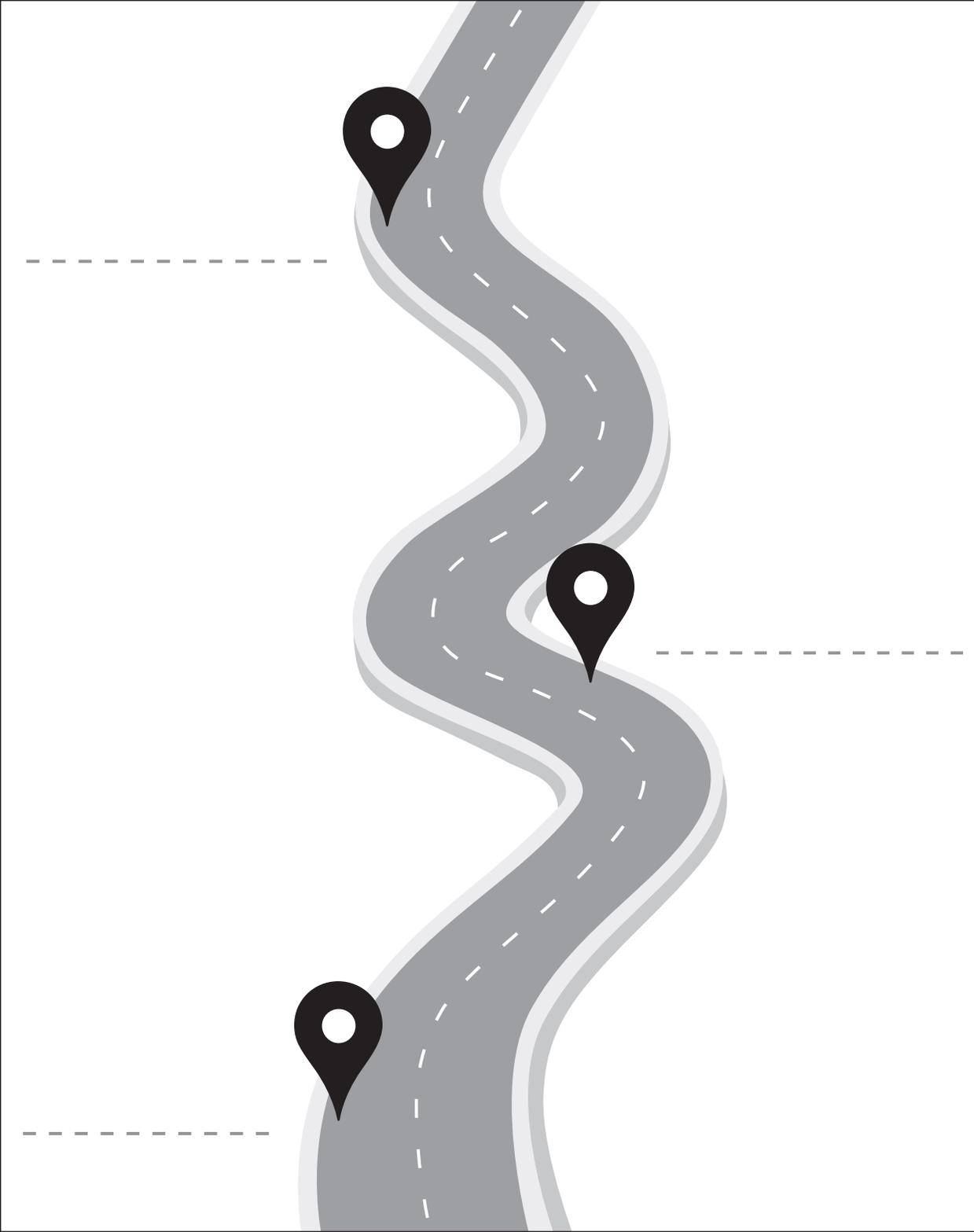
Thank you, God, for your presence in
our lives. We give everything that we have
considered today into your hands, letting go
of worry or pride and readying ourselves for
another day. We pray that we will go into the
next day with the wisdom and serenity that
comes from you. Amen.



Session 2: What Is Acceptance? Handout

- “Many people think that acceptance is a passive, doormat stance . . . But, acceptance is much deeper and more spiritually active than a stance of resignation. Acceptance allows us to see the world, ourselves, our loved ones as they really are” (page 36).
- “The prayer cannot begin with ourselves and our ability to control things. That is a self-centered prayer. The first step has to be about serenity and acceptance. These two actions ground us in the idea that something bigger—God, God’s creation, and God’s sovereignty—is at play” (page 35).
- “There are reasons why many people have rejected the practice of this kind of acceptance from their spiritual lives. For one, it can be very hard to give up control of a situation that we desperately want to turn out differently. Another significant reason is that this line of reasoning has been used to excuse harm after harm in the name of God” (page 37).
- “Acceptance can be an extraordinary gift for several reasons. First, it is actually quite impossible to change everything that we cannot accept. Accepting the things we cannot change releases us from the anxiety of living in a false reality” (page 39).

Session 2: Visual Representation of God's Path



Session 4: Finger Labyrinth



About the Author

Olivia DiAgostino is the transformation program coordinator at United Methodist Women, where she works on Mission u and other education and leadership development programs. A recent graduate of Drew Theological School, her interests include biblical study, church history, and the ways in which theology informs educational practice. She is active in her local United Methodist Church, and can often be found there cooking for a crowd on Sunday evenings with her partner.