

LEAVE YOUR COMFORT ZONE

ACTS 11:1-18

In this unit, crossing borders is about actions we take to reach out to others who are different from us, in order to love and protect them and build bridges of understanding and justice.

Another unit in the *Follow Me* curriculum, *Welcome All*, is somewhat like this unit in the sense of engaging difference. *Welcome All* focuses on including people in our community. In this unit, we focus on taking the initiative to leave our spaces and encounter people in theirs.



Perhaps you've seen the following quotation on a motivational poster somewhere: "A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for."¹ The quotation has been attributed to various people, but its message makes one think about whether we have gotten too comfortable in life and may need to make a change. Are we using our full potential? Many people have been inspired by these words to leave their comfort zones, their safe harbors, in order to be faithful. This can involve various levels of risk as well as huge rewards and transformation.

Harbors represent comfort zones, places where we feel safe and secure. All human creatures seek stability and comfort, and it is natural that we choose stability over potential chaos and danger. Examples of comfort zones include:

Home and family

Worshiping community and religious denomination

Neighborhood, town, state, nation

Social network of friends

School, sports, and clubs

Beliefs and assumptions about the world

1. John A. Shedd, *Salt from My Attic* (Portland, ME: The Mosher Press, 1928), 20.



Crossing borders to engage others who are different from us always requires leaving our comfort zone, perhaps for a short time, perhaps forever. It can be a small comfort zone we don't mind leaving, or it can require a total life change.

Consider the story of Moses. He was a Hebrew by birth, but raised among Egyptian royalty, comfortable indeed. Surely, he was educated, fed, and housed in very favorable conditions. Yet, one day, when he saw an enslaved Hebrew being beaten by an Egyptian soldier, he left his comfort zone and never returned. He crossed rigid class, cultural, and military lines in one quick move. Years later, he was called to leave his comfort zone again and lead his enslaved Hebrew siblings to freedom.

Throughout the Bible, we learn of people leaving their comfort zones. Abram and Sarai leave Ur of the Chaldees and travel to the land of Canaan (Genesis 11:1-9). Rebekah leaves her homeland of Haran to marry Isaac in Canaan (Genesis 24). Joseph and Mary leave the comfort of home in Nazareth and, then again, the village of relatives in Bethlehem. Paul and the apostles travel extensively, spreading the gospel.

Jesus crossed the borders of his cultural comfort zones all the time, despite the dangers. As a poor person, he dared to cross social, economic, and religious boundaries throughout his recorded ministry and engaged folks from all backgrounds. He changed the people he met, and he was changed by them, each encounter serving as an exemplification of the power of moving beyond what feels comfortable, familiar, and safe.



We all do less drastic forms of leaving our comfort zones every day in order to cross borders. We make a sincere attempt to communicate with someone who does not speak our language. We try new forms of worship, dear to some, scary to others. We take time to listen to someone from a different generation who thinks very differently than we do.

Think about the border you crossed and named on page 5.

➤ What comfort zone(s) did you have to leave in order to do that?

➤ What comfort zones did those you encountered have to leave in order to engage with you?

When we cross a border,
When we travel from here to there,
Who are we?
Are we tourists?
Are we pilgrims?

When someone crosses a border and comes to where we are,
When they travel from there to here,
Who are we?
Are we innkeepers?
Are we family?

Let us step out and discover who we are and who they are.

FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

Like all people, Jesus was born into a particular culture, ethnic group, class, and religion. As we grow, we are formed by these things and learn behaviors and customs that are expected by those who raise us. These borders help create comfort zones; when we meet others who don't share them, we pause and have to decide how to engage them.

Jesus was a Jew in occupied Palestine, a region where many cultures bumped into each other daily. People lived with suspicion of those outside of their own group. In the Gospels, we learn of his many attempts to leave his comfort zone and engage others. While the biblical text was written by his followers about him, we can only assume that those he encountered held their own assumptions and suspicions of him, coming from where he did. The early church came out of this context as well and grappled deeply with the question of which borders to cross in order to live in community and share Jesus' message.

Acts 10 and 11 tell the story of how the early Jewish followers of Jesus came to cross borders and widen their understanding of who was in their group. It is difficult to appreciate just how uncomfortable and awkward it must have been.

Take time to read Acts 10 and 11 and consider how it must have been for different groups to come together under the Christian umbrella. The story is really told twice. It is first told in chapter 10. In chapter 11, Peter tells the story to his Jewish Christian community, and we get their response.

The story goes something like this. Two men who would never have met, given their social and cultural situations, both followed visions that brought them together. Cornelius was a soldier, stationed in Caesaria, a Roman provincial capital. He was not a Jew. Reportedly, he was considered a decent person by Jews living under Roman occupation. In a dream, Cornelius was told to meet a man he did not know named Peter



On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshipped him.

—Acts 10:25

who was in the seaside town of Joppa. Having no idea what the dream meant, he told two slaves and a soldier who reported to him about the dream and sent them to fetch Peter.

Meanwhile in Joppa, Peter had a vision in which he was told to get up and kill food to eat, food that was considered unclean by his Jewish religion. Peter protested, but was told by the voice, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 10:15b). Peter had no idea what that meant. The people sent by Cornelius then showed up and explained that an angel had told Cornelius to meet Peter. They wanted to take Peter to meet Cornelius. Peter invited them in and gave them lodging. The next day, he went with them to meet Cornelius.

When the two men shared their visions, Peter understood his vision. He said, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every people anyone who fears him and practices righteousness is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34–35). (*Righteousness* is also translated “acts justly.”)

After Peter explained who Jesus was and what Jesus had done, Cornelius and all the Gentiles with him were baptized. What, up until then, had been a Jewish movement of Jesus followers, expanded to include non-Jews, or Gentiles.

Imagine the comfort zones that were left behind in order for people on all sides to cross some pretty rigid borders in that story. Cornelius was a Roman military officer. He had the power. Peter had none. Yet Cornelius and the Gentiles around him crossed into unknown territory in trust and became members of this group run by occupied Jews. What could the future possibly be?


Peter’s decision to baptize Cornelius did not occur unchallenged by his fellow Jews. In the very next chapter, Peter must explain his actions to the other Jewish followers of Jesus who are scandalized about what Peter has done, as they believe that Peter has sinned through interacting with Gentiles. Peter explains his vision, the call to go to Cornelius’s house. He tells them how he saw the Holy Spirit poured out on these Gentiles just as it had been poured out on the Jewish followers of Jesus. He eventually stuns them into silence by saying, “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” (Acts 11:17).


This inclusion of Gentiles threw the early church into chaos. Did the Gentiles have to follow Jewish law, convert to Judaism? Did this mean that early Jewish disciples were throwing away




their deeply held Jewish identity? How were they supposed to have communal meals when some kept kosher and some didn't? How did the daily parts of their lives together work with such different traditions and walks of life? (We see many of these debates play out in the letters included in the New Testament by Paul and others.)

It may have made the lives of the early Christians more confusing and even messy, but this move outside of their comfort zone forever changed the trajectory of the church. It established a church that could embrace many different backgrounds, traditions, and practices through shared belief. It allowed people to bring all of who they are to the community, instead of being forced to leave their cultures at the door and adopt an assimilated identity. It set the stage for the wide range of Christian practice we have today, as Christians across the world live out their faith in ways that resonate with their lives and contexts.

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- What are some groups of people who are different from you in ways that matter to you?

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- To reach out to them, what comfort zones would you need to leave behind?

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- What comfort zones would they need to leave behind when encountering you?

FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

From biblical times until now, people of faith have left their comfort zones in order to cross borders. What follows are just a few different examples to consider, including serving others, engaging and working with people of other denominations and faiths, and speaking up in disagreement with our own group leaders when it is important to do so.

SHEKHINAH CLINIC, GHANA

Some of the finest clinics and hospitals, literacy programs, and universities were founded and run by Christians who overcame fear and judgment and suspicion of others in order to build bridges of understanding and love.

The Shekhinah Clinic for the Poor and Destitute (shekhinahclinic.org/history) was begun by Dr. David Abdulai Fuseini. David was born to a father who had leprosy and a mother who often had to beg for help. His eleven siblings all died of poverty-related illnesses such as malnutrition, measles, and diarrhea. Through the amazing help of some unexpected benefactors and much sacrifice on his part, he became a doctor. Rather than seek a comfortable lifestyle he had never experienced,

David opened the health clinic with a Scottish Catholic priest he had met who was his spiritual mentor. The clinic continues to grow and serve the poorest of poor in northern Ghana. Dr. Abdulai Fuseini was awarded the Martin Luther King Jr. Award in 2012. Unfortunately, he passed away in 2016, but the clinic continues to operate.

PRESBYTERIAN EDUCATION BOARD, PAKISTAN

Many missionaries from all over the world have left their comfort zones and traveled to unknown places to help educate others. In the mid-nineteenth century, Presbyterian missionaries from the US worked in present-day Pakistan and focused efforts on serving the poorest of poor. Much of their work was centered on medical care and education, including educating girls who were not given a formal education. All children had to pay for school, which made it impossible for most. Many leaders in Pakistan were educated at these schools, eventually run by Pakistani leaders.

In 1972, the Islamic government nationalized all Urdu medium schools and colleges in the Punjab Province. Over time the quality of education deteriorated. In 1998, the government returned control of the schools; the Pakistani Presbyterian Education Board now manages 25 schools and four boarding houses for students from rural areas. In countries like Pakistan or the US, where one religion dominates and often discriminates against other religions, providing necessary public services such as education and healthcare are time-proven ways to cross borders and build bridges between people. Learn more at www.peb.edu.pk.



DISASTER ASSISTANCE

Many religious organizations and denominations have a disaster response arm, such as the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) or Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA). These networks offer ways for church members to respond to natural disasters and warfare around the world, either through donations and work that can be done from home, or through helping people travel to volunteer on site. The ACT Alliance is an organization of over 100 church-backed disaster relief organizations, organized by the World Council of Churches that enables better coordination between all churches.

On a smaller level, many churches have participated in this kind of work through mission trips. Groups from churches travel to areas impacted by disaster, poverty, or other kinds of need, to serve in some way. This might look like preparing and serving meals, helping to rebuild a house that has suffered from flood damage, or running a day camp for children. These kinds of mission trips allow us to connect with people we probably would not have met otherwise, learn new skills we can put to work, and put aside our own needs for a moment to help others. They are often outside our areas of expertise, but are a great way to begin stepping out of our comfort zones. Most people who go on these trips report that they receive more than they give. Those served also leave their comfort zones and work alongside those coming to help them, forming important bridges of understanding and support.



WHITE CHURCH LEADERS WHO CHALLENGED SLAVERY

Very few white American Christians challenged the sinful institution of slavery that was legal in the United States for 246 years, making this the richest country in the world thanks to the free labor squeezed out of Black men, women, and children. The 2022 book *What Kind of Christianity: A History of Slavery and Anti-Black Racism in the Presbyterian Church* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2022) details how most white Christians, particularly Presbyterians, were very active supporters of slavery and benefited from it. Very few challenged the practice. Those who left their comfort zones and spoke against it risked economic ruin, church sanctions and removal, and total isolation.



What are other examples where people leave their comfort zones in order to cross borders?

PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

EXAMINING OUR COMFORT ZONE

Our comfort zone can feel so natural it's easy to slip into a belief that what makes us comfortable is simply normal. Those who are members of dominant cultures particularly run the risk of viewing their comfort zone as the norm everyone should experience. The truth is that everything that feels safe and easy for one of us feels new and strange to someone else. As we seek to stretch ourselves, it is helpful to take an inventory and acknowledge the landscape of our comfort zones. In doing so, we can appreciate the traditions that are close to our hearts while also acknowledging what is not on our list that might help us step into the unknown.

Spend some time to consider the following questions and then draw an image of your comfortable worship space or write a brief description keeping the questions in mind.

➔ Where am I most comfortable in my worshipping community?

- ➔ What does the music sounds like?
- ➔ What is the style of worship? (formal, informal)
- ➔ How is prayer done?
- ➔ How do people dress?
- ➔ How is fellowship experienced?

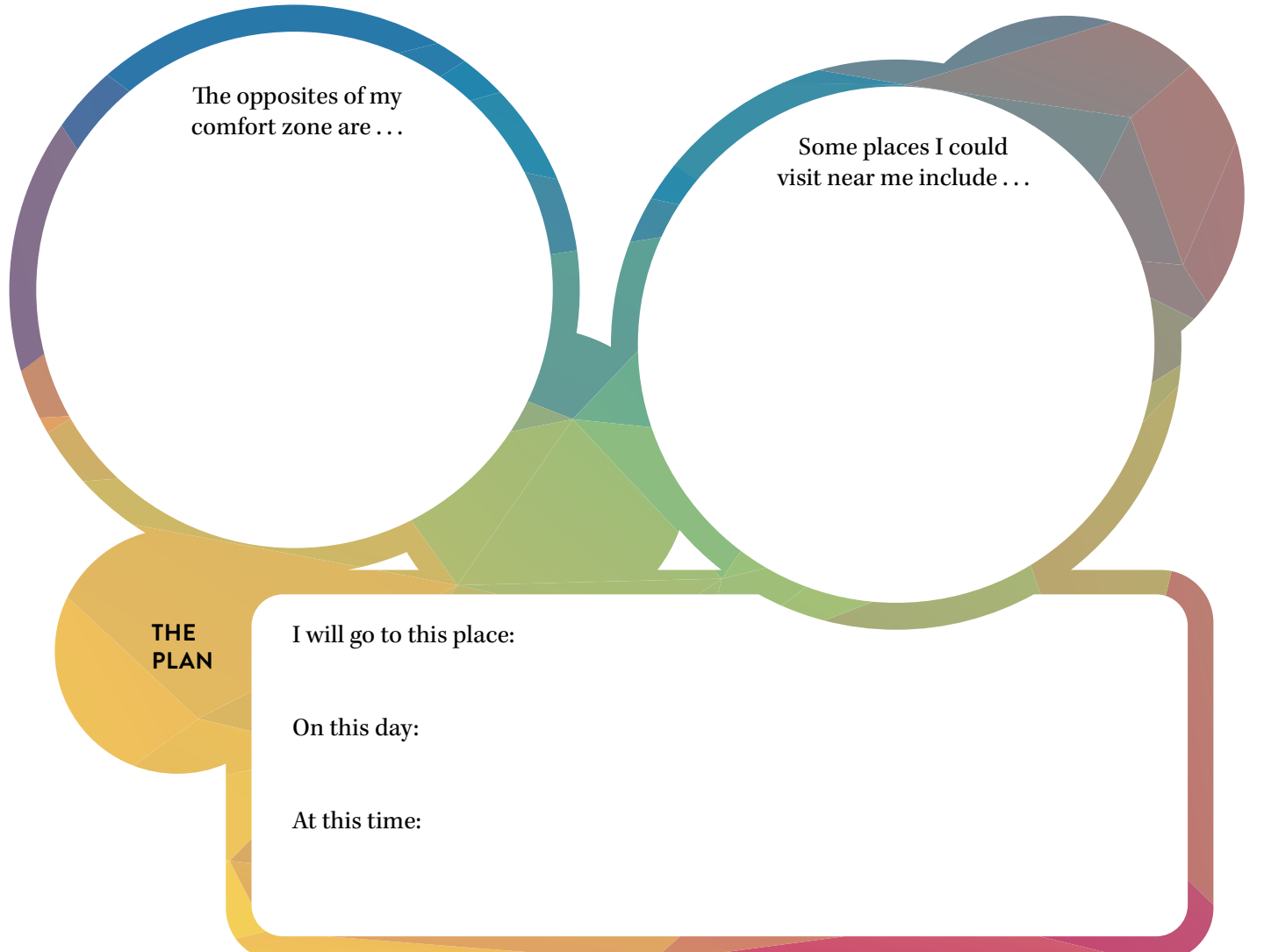
➔ Where am I most comfortable living?

- ➔ What do the buildings look like?
- ➔ What do the people look like?
- ➔ How do neighbors interact?
- ➔ What can you smell?
- ➔ What can you hear?

MAKING A PLAN

Now that you have established your comfort zone, let's brainstorm what it might look like to move outside of it. Review your lists and begin to think of the opposites of what you've written down. If you are more comfortable in a worship service with a high-energy rock band, perhaps a contemplative service would challenge you in a helpful way. If you feel at home in a place where everyone speaks your language, what might it look like to go to a place where you are in the linguistic minority?

As you engage in this practice, notice if you are placing value judgments on these opposites. If you are used to a very ordered worship service, a service where people speak in tongues might seem strange or even phony. If you find yourself making these small judgments, practice stepping back and remind yourself that these practices are deeply meaningful to others, and your own beloved traditions could be seen as trivial to someone else. Invite yourself to compassionate curiosity as you engage with traditions that are not your own.



The opposites of my comfort zone are ...

Some places I could visit near me include ...

THE PLAN

I will go to this place:

On this day:

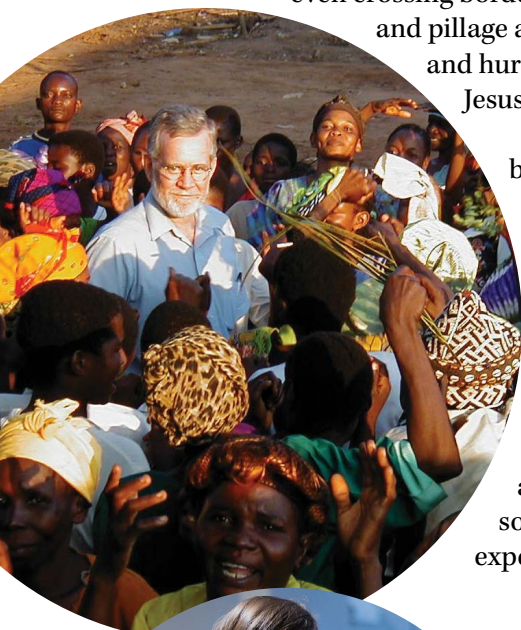
At this time:

FOLLOWING JESUS

To be clear, there is nothing inherently good or valuable about leaving comfort zones or even crossing borders. Invading armies leave their comforts of home to cross borders and pillage and kill others. Yet borders that impede us from loving one another and hurt some while privileging others are the types of borders we see Jesus and Christians crossing throughout history.

The good news is that the church has grown into what it is today because of people who were willing to leave their comfort zones to embrace new people and cultures, to do mission in a way that transforms both the church and the community, to learn from others and even change their own traditions when they stood in the way of the community's thriving.

Our comfort zones will always be there for us. We don't have to give up everything that feels safe and familiar. We can come back to those traditions that have nurtured us and fed our souls for years. But one way we can follow the example of Christ and the nudging of the Holy Spirit is to step out and experience something new, to meet new people, to pray new ways, and experience God like we never have before.



God of desert and wilderness, as I seek to follow you more fully, guide me in this practice. Be with me in my fear, give me the courage to move forward out of my comfort zone. Let me meet you in places I've never seen, in people I've never met, in words I've never heard before, that I may see a new expression of your beauty. Amen.