

PRACTICE GUIDE

JOURNEYING IN THE WILDERNESS

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DWELLING IN THE WORD



Dwell is a verb that means to reside, occupy, linger, remain, or give attention. Dwelling causes us to pause, focus, and be attentive to time, space, ideas, or people. Our homes are dwellings, physical spaces to be. Dwelling on concepts opens space to reflect and imagine. Dwelling in time heightens awareness of what is happening around us. **Dwelling is a practice of slowing down and paying attention.** In today's age of acceleration, dwelling is a countercultural activity. Twenty-first-century travelers are conditioned to stay on the move and respond quickly; dwelling is, therefore, a practice twenty-first-century travelers need to develop.

Being in God's word is an important practice for forming faith. Different traditions prefer different practices for being in God's word. Mainline Christian churches engage Scripture primarily through preaching, studying the Bible, and personal devotions. Each of those practices forms faith in a unique way. One practice for engaging the Bible is "dwelling in the word."

Dwelling in the word is centered on **listening**—to Scripture, God, and others. Through dwelling, or pausing and being present in the moment, participants open themselves to God and God's presence by focusing on a particular biblical text. Related to the ancient practice of *Lectio Divina*—a Latin phrase meaning “divine reading”—this practice invites participants to set aside

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Journeying in the Wilderness, 68-69



their agenda and be with God in community. As participants dwell with God, they listen for the Holy Spirit in the text and others.

The framework holds the structure for the practice, so anyone can lead it. It opens with prayer and reading a biblical text two times (with two different voices if done within a group). After the readings, participants find a partner and share: “What caught your imagination?” and “What question would you like to ask a biblical scholar?” After listening to their partner, people are invited to share with the group what they heard their partner say. The practice ends with prayer.

To develop dwelling in the word as a spiritual practice takes time. To integrate it into your approach to forming faith, here are some things to consider: First, *be thoughtful about the biblical text*. While there are no right or wrong texts, find ones that align with the occasion and/or the group’s purpose. Because this is an exercise of listening, shorter texts are preferred over longer texts. Second, *determine how long you will remain in the same text*. Remaining on the same text for an extended period of time allows participants to go deep, but changing texts each time provides variety and texture. Third, *review the framework each time*. While it seems repetitive, hearing the guidelines and questions reminds people of the framework, why each aspect is important, and of the expectations. Fourth, *focus on the listening and hearing dimensions of this practice*. Over time, participants can forget the importance of listening to their partner. Because listening is an undeveloped skill, it may be hard for some participants (or they may be overly excited about their ideas and not honor their partner’s). And finally, *stay curious and open to the Holy Spirit*. Dwelling in the word is not the place to problem solve, brainstorm, or share biblical knowledge—it is a space for listening, imagining, and being open.

Dwelling in the word is both faithful and disruptive. It is faithful in that it invites participants into God’s Story and is an extension of Christian practices across centuries. It is disruptive in that it slows the pace of life, turns our attention to God, challenges assumptions, and pushes us out of our comfort zone. It is a practice that makes room for the Holy Spirit to move in and through us. As communities practice dwelling in the word, it can become a habit that has the power to disrupt and transform previous patterns by redirecting focus from ourselves to God.



Pat Taylor Ellison of Church Innovation describes the fruit of this practice. Dwelling in the word: forms a community of the Holy Spirit, where the Spirit is as welcome and expected a presence as any of the human beings in the group. It gives people the chance to be listened into free speech [sic]. It gives everyone a more equitable access into the conversation and the community that is being formed in the scriptural story. And, over time, it gives the group the chance to see that they are living a story, and that their story is a part of God's story. It is not magic or formulaic or prescriptive. It is holy. It creates the community of goodwill that opens time and space for spiritual discernment for the sake of God's mission. (*Dwelling in the Word: a Pocket Handbook*, 91)

Here are some texts to get started:

Psalm 51:10-12

Micah 6:1-8

Luke 12:22-26

John 15:12-17

Acts 10:34-43

Ephesians 4:1-6