

THE END OF THE MAINLINE?



THE SURPRISING PAST & UNCERTAIN FUTURE OF AN AMERICAN PROTESTANT POWERHOUSE

Linked-In Learning • Fall 2022

STUDY GUIDE

NASSAU PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

How to Use this Guide

Leaders or participants, begin by reading the introduction to this study. It provides helpful information about the theme of the study and the resources, different from past studies.

- ★ **Participants** in a small group can best prepare for each meeting and the Sunday morning presentations by reading the assigned articles in advance. Then you can also read the Acts passage and the material that will guide the discussion, although this is not necessary to enter into the discussion.
- ★ If you are unable to attend a small group or the adult education class, you can use this guide each week to prepare to hear the sermon in worship on Sunday or during the week on the Nassau Church website.
- ★ If you are not in a small group but plan to come or listen to the adult education presentation on the website, use the plan for each week to guide and prompt your thinking.
- ★ If you would like to discuss these topics but the small group times aren't convenient for you, gather two or three friends on Zoom or meet together to talk about the topics using this guide.
- ★ **Leaders of small groups** can prepare by reading the text in advance as well as looking over the discussion plan to see how it will fit your group and the events of the day. For suggestions and reminders about leading small groups in general and this series in particular, turn to page 14 of this guide.

Contributors: Corrie Berg Heath Carter Carol Wehrheim

Introduction

As Presbyterians, we are part of a much wider stream within American Protestant life, often called the Mainline. This tradition was long a powerhouse, which wielded vast influence across all sectors of society. But in recent years most of the headlines it has garnered have centered on its decline. In this series we will revisit the Mainline's surprising past, paying especially close attention to how this unwieldy Protestant coalition navigated the fierce challenges of the 20th-century public square. Along the way we will also wrestle with the uncertainties of the Mainline's present and future. In this moment of flux and crisis, where might God be leading us?

Weekly small groups will read Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Henry Emerson Fosdick's *Shall The Fundamentalists Win?*, as well as recent articles and studies highlighting pivotal moments, remarkable leaders and upcoming challenges of our Protestant tradition.

Readings are included in each week's discussion questions. A complete list, including on-line links, is on the next page. In the electronic version of this study guide (PDF), clicking on those links will take you to the readings. You can find these links on the church website: "[Adult Education: The End of the \(Main\) Line?](#)" That description of the entire series is where also audio recordings of the Sunday Adult Education classes will be posted.

Join us Sunday mornings at 9:30 AM in the Assembly Room as Heath Carter, Associate Professor of American Christianity at Princeton Theological Seminary, will talk through the wider societal context and continuing impact of the selected readings. Carter specializes in the intersection of Christianity and American public life in the 20th century. Pastor Dave Davis will address these same themes and challenges in his Sunday sermon adding stories of the early church from the Book of Acts as reference and inspiration. Sermons are posted in the [Sermon Journal](#) of Nassau's website.

NASSAU PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
61 Nassau Street, Princeton, NJ 08542
609-924-0103 | nassauchurch.org

Reading List & Links

WEEK ONE

- ✦ "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center
<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

WEEK TWO

- ✦ "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" Harry Emerson Fosdick
<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5070/>

WEEK THREE

- ✦ "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King, Jr.
https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf

WEEK FOUR

- ✦ "The Black Manifesto," James Forman <https://bit.ly/3SDWBpl>
- ✦ Sarah Azaransky, "The Episcopal Saint whose journey for social justice took many forms, from sit-ins to priesthood," Religion News Service;
<https://religionnews.com/2022/06/28/the-episcopal-saint-whose-journey-for-social-justice-took-many-forms/>
- ✦ "U.S. Churches Offer Sanctuary to Aliens Facing Deportation," The New York Times (subscriber link) <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/04/08/us/us-churches-offer-sanctuary-to-aliens-facing-deportation.html?searchResultPosition=19>

WEEK FIVE

- ✦ Martin E. Marty, "From Declinism to Discovery," The Christian Century;
<https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2013-08/declinism-discovery>
- ✦ James Roh, "First Top Female Pastor at SLC's First Presbyterian comes as 'a bolt out of the blue' for Congregation," The Salt Lake Tribune; <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2022/08/14/first-female-pastor-slcs-first/>



Week One

October 23

Surveying the Landscape

We are living through a season of crisis for both American democracy and American Christianity. Together we'll explore some of the challenging features of our contemporary cultural landscape, including hyper-polarization, widespread decline of trust in institutions, and the rise of "the nones".

Outside Reading

- ★ "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center

Exploring the Theme

- ★ What trends in the American religious landscape impress you as most important?
- ★ What aspects of the data in the Pew report give you hope?
- ★ What aspects of the data concern you?
- ★ How does or doesn't this data relate to your own experiences, whether at Nassau Presbyterian Church or elsewhere?

Preparing for the Sermon

Read Acts 9:33-43

The Acts texts provide a glimpse into the life and ministry of the early church, beginning with the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Each scripture reading during these weeks presents a different snapshot of the times and the issues the early Christians faced.

- ✧ What do the stories about Aeneas and Tabitha reveal to us about the work of the disciples after receiving the Holy Spirit, especially Peter?
- ✧ What do you learn about Aeneas? About Tabitha?
- ✧ Luke, the author of Acts, often pairs the stories of a man and a woman. What makes the stories of Aeneas and Tabitha a good pairing? Why is it also a difficult one?

Questions for Reflection

- ✧ Think of a group of people you know outside Nassau Presbyterian Church, perhaps your colleagues at work or your neighbors. What do you know about their religious affiliations and practices? How does what you know fit the findings in the Pew Report?
- ✧ Recall a generation before you on one side of your family and the generation following you on the same side. How would you describe the religious practices of either generation? What are the trends in your family?
- ✧ As you recall the conversation in your small group, what do you want to listen for in the Sunday presentation?



Week Two

October 30

A Surprisingly Big Tent

For a generation now the story has been that, around the time of the infamous Scopes Monkey Trial, American Protestantism split into conservative and liberal camps, never to meet again. But the reality is much more complicated. Together we'll explore the surprisingly capacious contours of the 20th-century Mainline tent.

Outside Reading

- ★ "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" Harry Emerson Fosdick

Exploring the Theme

- ★ What does Fosdick find so objectionable about the fundamentalists?
- ★ Who is included in his vision of "the evangelical churches"?
- ★ To what extent is Fosdick's question—"Is not the Christian church large enough to hold within her hospitable fellowship people who differ on points like this and agree to differ until the fuller truth be manifested?"—applicable to the 21st century churches and all the many lines that divide believers today?

Preparing for the Sermon

Read Acts 5:12-42

The passage from Acts for this week includes the two verses (vv. 38 and 39) that Fosdick quotes in his sermon. This discussion will place them in the larger context in Acts. The apostles (Luke's favorite name for the twelve) are still in Jerusalem, but actively preaching and healing.

- ✦ What is the context for this encounter between the apostles and the Jerusalem Council, the Jewish leaders?
- ✦ Imagine the conversation among Peter and the other apostles after they are arrested the first time. What might they be saying to one another?
- ✦ If you were a member of the Jerusalem Council, how do you think you would react to the work of the apostles? How might you respond to Gamaliel?

Questions for Reflection

- ✦ When have you listened to someone who strongly disagreed with you with “a spirit of tolerance”? What were the circumstances? What was the outcome?
- ✦ What might help a congregation and its leaders develop “a spirit of tolerance and Christian liberty”?
- ✦ What from the small group discussion stands out in your memory?

Reflections

Prayers



Week Three

November 6

The Perils & Promise of a Big Tent, Part 1: The Civil Rights era

Together we'll reflect on how Mainline Protestants' record on civil rights underscores both the perils and promise of a big-tent faith. Seeing the impact of this era on the church in the 60s may help us understand the situation in which we find ourselves today in the church and in the world.

Outside Reading

- ★ "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King, Jr.

Exploring the Theme

- ★ What can we glean from the role of Christian churches in the civil rights movement at the time of King's famous letter?
- ★ What is his critique of "the white moderate"?
- ★ What, if any, parts of the letter stand out for you as dated?
- ★ What, if any, parts of the letter continue to resonate today?

Preparing for the Sermon

Read Acts 13:42–52

Paul and Barnabas are in Pisidian Antioch. First, they go to speak in the synagogue, as is their custom. Paul preaches about Jesus Christ to the Jews there. Our text begins after Paul’s sermon, which he concludes with a quote from the prophet Habakkuk (1:5).

- ✧ As Paul and Barnabas leave the synagogue, many who heard Paul want them to return on the next Sabbath to say more. Why is their reception cooler when they return on the next Sabbath?
- ✧ Skim vv. 16–41, Paul’s sermon. What are the major themes of Paul’s message?
- ✧ What is the outcome of Paul and Barnabas’ visit to Antioch?

Questions for Reflection

- ✧ Review page 4, paragraph 8, of “Letter from Birmingham Jail”. How do King’s words, written decades ago, connect with your experience of the church today?
- ✧ King, on page 5, paragraph 4, counters a charge of extremism against him. What other “extremists” would you add to his list, especially those you identify from the last 50 years? How do you answer the concluding question in that paragraph for yourself?
- ✧ Which parts of the small group discussion do you want to meditate on during this week?



Week Four

November 13

The Perils & Promise of a Big Tent, Part 2: After the 1960s

Together we'll reflect on the extent to which the Mainline Protestants succeeded in holding together their unwieldy, big-tent coalition in the decades following the 1960s. The three articles for this week look at three different difficulties facing the church during these years.

Outside Reading

- ★ "The Black Manifesto," James Forman, *The New York Review of Books*
- ★ "The Episcopal Saint whose journey for social justice took many forms, from sit-ins to priesthood," Sarah Azaransky, *Religion News Service*
- ★ "US Churches Offer Sanctuary to Aliens Facing Deportation," George Volsky, *The New York Times*.

Exploring the Theme

- ★ In what ways do you imagine that the witness and activism of saints like James Forman, Paulie Murray and John Fife pushed fellow Christians beyond their comfort zone?
- ★ Is it possible to be serious about the pursuit of justice and to still find common ground in our faith?
- ★ When push comes to shove, what do you tend to prioritize in your own life?
- ★ What do you hope we here at Nassau Church will prioritize?

Preparing for the Sermon

Read Acts 15:1–11

The disagreement described in the Acts text for this week is not the first one in the early church found in Acts (see the story of Cornelius and Peter before the Jerusalem church in Acts 10 and 11). Nor is it the last one described in this book about the early church (see Paul’s meeting with the Jerusalem church leaders in Acts 21).

- ✧ In Acts 10, Peter has a vision about eating unclean foods and his visit to Cornelius, a Roman soldier, is recorded; in Acts 11, Peter tells about this visit to the leaders of the Jerusalem church. In the text for this week, verses 7–9 refer to Peter’s visit to Cornelius and what happened there. Why do you think these questions about requirements and inclusion have surfaced in the early church?
- ✧ Why was circumcision such a hot topic for some of the Jewish believers?
- ✧ The account of the meeting of the Jerusalem church in Acts 15 is often described as a turning point for the early church. If that is the case, what does this decision mean for the early church?

Questions for Reflection

- ✧ As you consider the stories of Foreman, Murray and Fife along with the account of the decision in Acts 15, what are comparable stories or moments for the church in contemporary times?
- ✧ Sometimes the way our body reacts tells us as much as what our head is saying. As you read the Black Manifesto, how did your body and soul react to the demands presented?
- ✧ Given the three areas of concern in the articles, all of which are at least 50 years ago, how do you think we, church or society, have progressed in any of these areas of concern today?



Week Five

November 20

Listening for God's Call at the End of the (Main)Line?

While it's easy to become overwhelmed by stories of decline and worries about cascading crises, we have not been given a spirit of fear. Where might God be calling us to go from here?

Outside Reading

- ★ "From Declinism to Discovery," Martin E. Marty, *The Christian Century*
- ★ "First Top Female Pastor at SLC's First Presbyterian comes as 'a bolt out of the blue' for Congregation," James Roh, *The Salt Lake Tribune*

Exploring the Theme

- ★ What would it look like for us here at Nassau Church to engage the genuine challenges of our moment, but to do so in a way that leads toward, not a spirit of "declinism," but rather a journey of discovery?
- ★ What other "bolts out of the blue" have you noticed either in your life or our congregation's?
- ★ Where do you sense God might be leading us as we move forward together?

Preparing for the Sermon

Read Acts 2:42–47

After reading various texts in the later chapters of Acts, we turn to a passage that describes the life of the community of believers shortly after Pentecost when they received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

- ✧ What are the key elements of their life together? What is the significance of each one?
- ✧ From this description, what can we surmise about the reactions of those outside the community to this band of believers?
- ✧ Who or what is behind all this activity? What difference does that make?

Questions for Reflection

- ✧ In “From Declinism to Discovery”, Marty opens with three words:
 - ✧ Finitude (the state of having limits)
 - ✧ Contingency (a future event or circumstance which is possible but cannot be predicted with certainty)
 - ✧ Transience (the state of lasting only for a short time)

In what ways can you connect these three words, or any one of them, to the current situation of the Presbyterian Church (USA)? Of Nassau Presbyterian Church?

- ✧ What signs of hope do you see in the story about Jamie White, the pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Salt Lake City? Where do you see similar signs of hope in our congregational life and ministry?



Notes for Small Group Leaders

The leader of a small group is not a teacher. A teacher would lead a Bible study. While the goal of our small groups is to increase knowledge about the church and the Bible, the primary goal is to deepen relationships among the participants as each one grows in relationship with God and Jesus and as Christ's disciple.

Review the group covenant on the back page of this study guide together at your first gathering. It is important that each one is clear about the guidelines that make for a successful small group experience. Invite the participants to add to the covenant.

A simple process for each week, which you will adapt according to your group's desires, could be:

- ★ Ask the opening question (see below).
- ★ Prayer by the leader or a participant
- ★ Read and discuss the questions in "Exploring the Theme". Encourage participants to refer to the article(s) for the week.
- ★ Read the Acts text and discuss the questions for it in "Preparing for the Sermon."
- ★ If there is time, move to the "Questions for Reflection". Pose one or more of the questions, allowing a time of silence for personal reflection. Invite comments from any who wish to speak.
- ★ Save at least five minutes to ask for prayer concerns and to pray together.

Opening Questions

To encourage the participants to become better acquainted, especially if someone is new, invite everyone to answer a question at the beginning of each gathering. This moment of fun also helps the group make the transition from what has been uppermost in their minds to enter into the small group discussion. The questions below are suggestions; feel free to come up with your own.

- ✧ Week One: What is your earliest memory of church, either one you attended regularly or one you went to for a special occasion?
- ✧ Week Two: In conversation with an eight-year-old, when I used the word “Presbyterian”, she replied, “Presbyterian. I don’t know that word.” When were you first aware of different religious groups?
- ✧ Week Three: What is an early recollection of a person who was not like everyone else you knew?
- ✧ Week Four: Who is one person you admire for their pursuit of justice for themselves and/or others?
- ✧ Week Five: What change have you observed in something from your past (school, hometown, college, workplace, etc.)?

Give the group a moment to think about the question. You can set an example of the length of the answer by going first. Anyone may choose not to answer, but encourage each one to speak.

Questions for Reflection

The questions for reflection at the end of each week can be discussed in the group or referred to them to think about at home. It is not necessary for everyone to respond to these questions every week. If you wish, invite comments on the questions for the previous week at the opening of the gathering.

Leaders have often commented about how much they grew in faith by preparing for and leading the small groups. May you find this to be true and remember that the Spirit of God will be present in and among you. May “The End of the (Main)line?” be a time of renewal and hope for you and your small group. Thank you for your leadership.

Group Covenant

- ★ **Everyone in the group is a learner.** In a small group experience, there are no experts. Learning is a lifelong process.
- ★ **Confidentiality is essential.** To build and maintain an atmosphere of trust, what happens in the group stays in the group.
- ★ **Commit to the group.** Physically be present each time, rather than treat attendance as just another option. Mentally, listen to others and participate fully.
- ★ **Speak from your own experience and awareness.** When offering an opinion, claim it as your opinion rather than make generalizations.
- ★ **Each voice is important.** If you are usually quiet in a group, make an effort to offer your thoughts. If you speak out easily, hold back for others to speak or invite someone who hasn't spoken to speak.
- ★ **Focus on ideas, not the person.** If you have a different point of view, disagree with the idea. Don't belittle the person.