

# In Step

## **Pastor's and Leader's Guide**

This guide has been written as a launching pad for pastors and leaders to use as they explore the key passage and themes of the In Step series with their churches and small groups.

This Pastor's and Leader's Guide has been prepared by a team of current and former pastoral and mission practitioners from Riverton Baptist Community Church in WA. Riverton Baptist Community Church has a long history of partnership with Global Interaction and currently has seven members serving as long-term cross-cultural workers with Global Interaction teams.

We sincerely thank the team who invested their skill, time and passion to writing this material including Pastor Colin Meadows, Eric Martin, Pastor Kenny Ho, Bruce Axtens and Carolyn Axtens. Together they bring many years of experience in cross-cultural mission in Australia, Africa and Asia.

## **Key Themes**

Drawn from the short film *In Step* and explored through the lens of Acts 15:1-29.

*View and download the short film at [www.globalinteraction.org.au/InStep\\_ShortFilm](http://www.globalinteraction.org.au/InStep_ShortFilm)*

1. **Faith not Religion is Central** Acts 15:1-4
2. **In Step with Jesus** Acts 15:5-11
3. **In Step with Others** Acts 15:12-21
4. **In Step with God's Mission** Acts 15: 22-29

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## **“We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” Acts 15:11**

Dear friends,

In every generation the church has needed to learn how to keep in step with the mission of the Father by following Jesus, in the power of the Spirit. This is not automatic and it is not natural. The tendency of our human nature is to look inward and to ensure our own needs are met first. Yet Jesus tells us that He, “did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28) This is our example to follow and it requires God’s gathered people, the church, to make intentional choices to look outward, to reach out and to place the needs of others above our own. Not an easy task for any church! However, this is how we stay in step with the God and His mission.

We first observe this elevation of the needs of others in the church, as it is recorded in the book of Acts, where Peter declares, “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.” (Acts 15:19)

In our local church, mission is very important to us! It’s been a privilege for our team to partner with Global Interaction through preparing this pastor’s and leader’s guide. We pray that they will support you and your church in exploring mission in your context and beyond.

May we keep in step with Him,

**Wayne Field, Lead Pastor at Riverton Baptist Community Church.**

## *one*

### Faith not Religion is Central

#### Acts 15:1-4

##### Exploring the Passage

In Acts 15:3, it says, “The church sent them [Paul, Barnabas and other believers] on their way [to Jerusalem], and as they travelled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad.” It is clear in the passage many followers of Jesus cannot hide their joy and excitement to see Gentiles turning to Jesus Christ.

And this is how the story begins...

As Paul and Barnabas sailed into Antioch, weary from travel and teaching in cities and synagogues of Asia Minor, they had much to thank God for. They gathered the Christians together and told of the new believers in Cyprus, Perga, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. They most likely also shared of the challenges and difficulties, but the highlight was “... how God had opened the door of faith for the Gentiles.” (Acts 14:27)

In the days of the early church the Jews were those descended from Israel, of the Jewish faith. It was to them that the Gospel was first preached and they felt an exclusive entitlement to it. Many of them had become Christians.

Within the Jewish community were Pharisees who were holy men who not only kept the law but often added to it and demanded that Jews kept every aspect of the law. Several Pharisees had become Christians.

The term ‘Gentiles’ referred to anybody that was not a Jew. The Gentiles were not from Jewish stock. They were from the outside, the unwashed ones so to speak. The Jews loosely grouped these people together and called them Gentiles. In time the word ‘Gentile’ became a word of derision used by the Jews. Many Gentiles had become Christians.

So, picture the church at Antioch. In some rows of chairs sat the Christian Jews feeling entitled to the Gospel because of who they were. In other rows, the Christian Pharisees, ready with the rules at their fingertips. Filling the remaining chairs, the Christian Gentiles, excited about their new relationship with Jesus. All Christians. All different. It was a clash waiting to happen...

The Jewish believers were very uncomfortable with these Gentiles being in their presence. The Pharisees response was that these strangers could only be accepted if they were willing to leave their Gentile ways and adopt Jewish ways. Then they could be considered for possible inclusion in the faith community. They would thus need to become Jews to then become Christians. (Acts 15:1)

Paul and Barnabas would not accept this thinking. (Acts 15:2) People who came to faith in Jesus should be warmly received, regardless of their religious and ethnic heritage. This difference of opinion led to a sharp dispute and as a result Paul and Barnabas were sent to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem to get a ruling on the matter. At the same time, members of the opposition went with them to explain their position.

Can a resolution be reached? See session two!

##### Key Takeaways

- » The wonderful reality of church is that it is full of people from different ethnicities, worldviews and life experiences. **All are welcome!**
- » To enter the kingdom of God we all need to admit that we are sinners and that Christ died for our sins. **Let’s welcome without judgment.**
- » Everybody who comes to faith in Jesus should be warmly received and welcomed, regardless of their religious and ethnic heritage.

## In Action

*A story from Global Interaction's ministry among the Yawo of Mozambique.*

Cross-cultural worker Ben shares, "This year I have had the wonderful, humbling, and stretching experience of working through God's story with a group of Muslim Yawo men at our city's central market. It's a surreal place to hold a Bible study. **Amidst all the hustle and bustle of egg sellers and furniture salesmen, mattress sellers and groups of women selling fruits and vegetables, not to mention all the people coming in and out with their shopping, there we are, week in and week out, reading the word of God.**

We've been working through God's story chronologically, beginning with God at creation, through the fall and expulsion of Adam and Even from the garden. The calling of Abraham. All the highlights and low lights from Israel's kings, and prophets, their exile and return. We've read about Jesus, Israel's messiah; his life, death, resurrection and ascension. Finishing with the beginnings of the early Church. It's a biblical panorama, which has been received so much better than my little faith could have dreamed possible. Remember all these men are Muslims, they have been from birth.

**One day, as we finished reading the story of Jesus' ascension and the coming down of God's Holy Spirit the two leaders of the group declared "We believe that Jesus died, he rose again and now sits at God's right hand." Talk about a wow moment. I had to ask them to repeat what they said just so I could make sure I heard it correctly.**

Another day, a man, probably in his 50s comes over from another table and shouts out, "As-salāmu 'alaykum" which means peace be upon you. I had seen him before, but hadn't actually spoken to him. I could tell by his raised voice that something was up, no one raises their voice here, it's a cultural no no. He, in an accusatory tone, asked the group what they were doing.

Were they just reading for reading's sake, teaching the visitors about Islam, or were they seeking to go into competition with Islam; a big accusation. That's when things got interesting.

Rather than shy away from the confrontation they pushed back. Totally the opposite of what I would've done. Thankfully I didn't have to do anything, this wasn't my fight. The guys in the group fired back. "How are we in competition with Islam?" they asked. "We have the Scriptures here, this is God's word." As they held up the book of Luke. The man then went off ranting about how what these guys in the group were doing was against the teachings of Islam. He said, "What you are doing is wrong and dangerous and you need to stop."

They then fired back again. They said, "These things you're saying you've only heard second hand in the mosque. But we're here reading the scriptures and it's telling us what is right and wrong. You don't know what you're talking about, but we do because we are reading it for ourselves. It's right here in our hands." As they held up the book of Luke again.

I just sat there quietly in awe of my friends. This was no joke. For them this was the real deal. They put their necks on the line for the Gospel that day. And the beautiful thing was, this Gospel wasn't the foreigner's Gospel this Gospel was their own. They owned it and were protective over it. It was a humbling, glorious moment.

**It is only early days for this emerging group but if the Word of God has captivated these men's hearts in such a powerful way so early on, who knows what the future holds for them and their community. The word of God is alive and active in this place. I'm so grateful for the opportunity to witness it take root first hand.**

Thank you Jesus!"

## two

### In Step with Jesus

#### Acts 15:5-11

##### Exploring the Passage

In an increasingly pluralistic and ethnically diverse post-modern era how do we share the Gospel without either complicating or compromising it? Either way may be placing stumbling blocks before faith seekers. Striking a balance within the sociocultural context of faith seekers is undoubtedly one of the key points in Acts 15.

In Acts 15:5, those belonging to the party of the Pharisees argued that “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses.” The practice of circumcision can be traced back to the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 17 and is deeply rooted to the Jewish identity as the chosen nation. However, imposing that on faith seekers of non-Jewish descendants is theologically saying Gentiles need to be ethnically primed prior to salvation.

In Acts 15:8-9, Peter responds, saying, “God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them...He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.” Why is circumcision difficult for the Gentiles? For Gentile men in a society in which their pride is tightly connected to their gender and sociocultural heritage, the reality of being circumcised would not only be physically painful but also humiliating. Arguably, this would be one of the biggest stumbling blocks to their faith. Peter here strives to explain that the distinction lies internally in their heart, not externally in the absence of their foreskin. (See also Matt 25:31-46.)

Peter continues in Acts 15:11 saying, “No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” To repent and believe in Jesus is to receive salvation.

Peter says it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that all are saved, inclusive of both Gentiles and Jews. The grace of our Lord means salvation through faith universally, *just as they are*.

James concludes in Acts 15:19-21, “...therefore, we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood”. These instructions are to ensure the Gentile followers of Jesus will not be caught up in any lifestyle that is contrary to Jesus’ teaching and the standards of God. They also seek to promote fellowship among Jew and Gentile followers of Jesus.

To sum up, while we should not *complicate* the Gospel, it is equally important not to *compromise* it by trying to accommodate faith seekers by indiscriminately simplifying the Gospel without discernment of the Holy Spirit.

##### Key Takeaways

- » **Do not put any yoke on faith seekers’ neck.** No one in the world, regardless of their ethnicity and religious backgrounds, should be required to be ethnically primed through observing culturally specific rules and customs of others in order to receive salvation.

We need not to place the western, eastern or middle east’s ‘yoke’ on the faith seekers of different nationalities and religious backgrounds.

## Key Takeaways cont.

- » The distinction between goats and sheep is identified by faith in the heart, not by the clothes or accessories worn externally. Let us open our arms to **embrace people of all cultures and backgrounds**.
- » **Jesus is our salvation.** While acknowledging the above, let's not lose sight of the importance of communicating and maintaining the holiness of Godly living in Christ. It is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that all of us come to Christ, without the need to observe the Jewish customs and rules.

## In Action

### *A story from Global Interaction's ministry among the Yawo of Malawi.*

More than 20 years ago, Babba W was a talented young soccer player in Malawi. He grew up in a Muslim family like all the people in his Yawo community, and while his faith was important to him, soccer was what he loved.

His father was a devout Muslim and encouraged Babba W to prioritise his faith and pursue knowledge of God, even telling him to join the weekly Bible storytelling group in the village. Babba W began attending the group sometimes and engaged with the stories, but remained focused on soccer.

In the Yawo, Muslim culture, dreams and visions are taken seriously and meaning is sought. God often uses dreams to reveal Himself and Jesus as His son to Muslim people. **This was Babba W's experience when one night Jesus spoke to him in a dream. Jesus appeared before Babba W and told him that he had to choose between following his own path or following Him (Jesus). Babba W chose to follow Jesus, but he was still grappling with what it all meant in his cultural context.**

When he met with the faith community group again following the dream, he shared that it's as if the words from the Bible were 'living' and speaking to his soul.

**Over years, Global Interaction cross-cultural workers journeyed with Babba W and he is now a key Yawo faith leader. He has received a gift of insight which compels him to share and explore the Gospel message with others. He boldly shares his testimony, preaches and prays with the village groups, inviting people to meet and follow Jesus as the only way to God.**

# three

## In Step with Others

### Acts 15:12-21

#### Exploring the Passage

Sharing from God's new revelation, Peter had a unique vision revealed by God which completely and radically changed his views of Gentiles. That revelation was "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." (Acts 10:15). This strikes the heart of the devout Jew, Peter. This convinces him that God saves everyone and therefore, he concludes, "So if God gave Gentiles the same gift [Holy Spirit] as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God." (Acts 11:15-17) This sets the tone of the next few chapters in Acts.

Sharing from their own experiences, Barnabas and Paul, would have been able to speak of their experiences in Perga in Pamphylia (Acts 13:13-48) where many Jews and Gentiles had put their faith in Jesus. They may also have shared of the miracles done by God in Lystra and of the increasing opposition they faced, culminating in Paul receiving a near-fatal stoning. (Acts 14)

Those who are engaged in mission, evangelism and church planting should look to the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit to give them discernment when listening to the new stories of faith seekers and dealing with issues in cross-cultural and multi-ethnic situations.

After Barnabas and Paul had finished, James concluded the meeting with the words of the prophet Amos who revealed that God had always intended to adopt the Gentiles into his family so that they could bear his name. Amos 9:11-12 and Acts 15:15-18 reiterates that God's words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

"After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' — things known from long ago."

Having established God's will from the scriptures, James then handed down his judgment: that the church should not make believing in Jesus a hard thing to do. He proposed that a letter to this effect be written and sent to the Gentile churches bearing moral prohibitions against idolatry and fornication and a reiteration of the command given to Noah regarding the eating of blood (Genesis 9:4). James then encouraged all who still wanted to know the law of Moses to go their local synagogue.

#### Key Takeaways

- » Hearing the stories and experiences of God's people sharing the Good News is a great source of encouragement, and informs both thanksgiving and prayer. **We should share how we're sharing!**
- » Answers to the perplexing issues of our day must always be sought in the Word of God and with the help of the Holy Spirit.
- » We should teach only that which Jesus taught (Matthew 28:20 "... and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.").

## In Action

*A story from Global Interaction's ministry among the K people of the Silk Road Area.*

Over the summer, David and Eliza (long-term cross-cultural workers) got to know a seven-year-old boy from their street as he often played in their backyard with their kids. Heartbreakingly, the little boy recently died. One evening their neighbour came around to their house to let David and Eliza know what happened and to invite them to go over to the family's house whose son had passed away.

Together they went to the house, David joining the men and Eliza sitting and crying with the women. Returning home, their neighbour asked if they would join them again the following morning. David and Eliza said, "We're not sure if we should. We don't want to make anyone uncomfortable." Their neighbour replied, "We are all neighbours. We should all go."

So the following morning they journeyed together to the house. David and Eliza felt a strong sense of solidarity... regardless of their nationality, they are neighbours and they support each other.

**David and Eliza share, "What we learnt about K culture, how we were included and the time we were able to spend with neighbours we otherwise didn't know very well was invaluable. We can't begin to understand the depth of grief this family is feeling in losing their son and brother. But the way that God allowed us to be involved in this event is difficult to describe with words.**

While we pray for the family, we are grateful for this opportunity to share in their grief and support our neighbours. Thank you for continuing to pray for this family and for our street, and the role we have to play in living alongside these people."



## four

### In Step with God's Mission

#### Acts 15:22-29

##### Exploring the Passage

Unprecedented bush fires, droughts, terrorism, Coronavirus and increased violence. These are all events causing fear, anxiety and stress in our world today. It leads many to question, "What is God's plan for the world?"

When we look into Acts 15:19 and 22-29 we find that God has a plan for this world, and He wants us to be a part of it.

Firstly, in verse 19 we see that despite differences in cultures, ethnicities or world views, seeing people come to know Christ as their personal saviour is the priority. Only as we know Christ can we know peace and hope in this world and for eternity.

Secondly, Acts 15:22-29 speaks of the importance of godly and courageous leadership. A letter from the Council was sent. It is a courageous, timely and authentic document. It is courageous because it would have antagonised the Jewish community. It is timely because the Gentile faith seekers were growing in number and faith. It is authentic because it comes from a well-recognised body. This letter sets the precedent for churches and evangelical organisations to exercise their God-given position to use their influence to build a culture of reaching faith seekers.

Thirdly, it requires a team effort. In Acts 15:22, "... the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch." God wants to mobilize people, obedient to His call to share the story of Jesus, locally and across cultural barriers. God's work in reaching the world with the message of Jesus requires a team effort involving the whole Church, locally and globally.

Fourthly, it requires sincere devotion of His servants. In Acts 15:24-27 men who have risked their lives for the Gospel were chosen. Barnabas and Paul risked their lives for the Gospel proving their sincere devotion to God. God's message is spread through sincere devotion. God wants us to support leaders who have proved their devotion to God no matter what the personal cost is.

Finally, God wants everyone to stop and listen to Holy Spirit. In Acts 15:28 "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you..." Stop and listen to what the Spirit of God is saying to the Church, just as the apostles did.

God wants people to come to faith from within different contexts and cultures. He wants us to be part of His mission to save the world, working within other cultures not against them.

##### Key Takeaways

- » **Sharing the Gospel is the priority.** The Lord God wants His message of love and forgiveness to be expressed and understood by all the people groups of the world (Colossians 1:1-12).
- » **God puts everyone in different positions to serve His great purposes** (Eph 4:11-13). Leaders have their role to play in mobilising people to reach out, locally and globally, as led by the Holy Spirit.
- » God's plan is for us to **create a community for fellowship that glorifies Him**, just as the Jerusalem church did. This requires a team effort and the sincere devotion of His servants.
- » **The cultural context of your ministry matters.** Stop and listen to how the Holy Spirit is guiding you to become more relevant in sharing the Gospel in different contexts and cultures.

## In Action

### *A story from Global Interaction's ministry among the Ethnic Thai of Thailand*

Years ago, Muana and Villy (long-term cross-cultural workers) moved into another neighbourhood in rural Thailand. Next door lived an Ethnic Thai woman, Mae Khui, who Villy quickly began building a friendship with. Mae Khui would bring vegetables to their door and Villy would reciprocate with gifts of fruit or meals. At the same time, Muana was developing a friendship with Mae Khui's husband. **Little by little, as trust grew, God opened opportunities for Muana and Villy to share faith and stories of Jesus with their neighbours.**

After a few months, Mae Khui was employed as the family's home helper (something commonly expected of foreigners in Thailand). Everyday Villy and Mae Khui would do life together and as the opportunity arose, Villy shared about Jesus. Mae Khui's family was going through a challenging financial situation and she was the key income earner. She prayed this prayer, "Jesus, if you are really the true God as Villy tells me, then please let Muana and Villy love me so I can keep this job."

Right at that moment, as she finished the prayer, she struck by a memory that she hadn't thought since it happened. Twenty years previously, she had had a dream where someone told her she would be the home helper at the house next door, the one Muana and Villy live in. She believed at that point and thought, "It was Jesus who planned it all out for me."

**When Villy heard this, she was so humbled. In coming to this neighbourhood, she had thought that she was entering a dark place and bringing God into it. However, hearing Mae Khui's story reminded her that God was already there and already at work.**

Today, Mae Khui remains strong in her faith and actively shares with her family and friends and invites them to the weekly faith community gatherings.

## Conclusion

In Acts 15:3, the followers of Jesus are overjoyed to see Gentiles coming to Christ. The theme of welcoming a group of people of different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds to the Kingdom of God is very prominent. The passage cannot stress more the importance of not making the Gospel burdensome to people but at the same time upholding the holiness of living when following Jesus Christ.

Mission is welcoming people of all diversities to Christ without judging because this is how we are welcomed into Christ (John 3:17). Jesus embraces us with love, mercy and forgiveness. He takes us to the Kingdom of God as we are. Let's embrace one another because this is how we are received.

When welcoming people to Christ, we ought to be embracing but discerning, discerning but not discriminating. Let's not complicate the Gospel but also let's not compromise it either! Acts 15:19 sums it up well, "... therefore, we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God."