



Desert Fathers and Mothers

If you thought these were social outcasts who just couldn't make it in this world, think again. They found a way to be faithful when the way was being distorted by the new institutional church.

Preparing for the Session

- Read "Opening," "Exploring," "Responding," and "Closing" to choose activities that fit your group and time frame. Check "Teaching Alternatives" for other ideas and for extension activities.
- Invite two members of your group to participate in a role-play/interview, where you will be the interviewer and they will be desert elders. Give each of them a copy of the interview questions in "Exploring" in this Leader's Guide. Ask them to read the Participant Handout in its entirety as well as the interview questions. They may want to ad lib their answers, based on what they have learned, or they may prefer to read from sections of the handout.
- Prior to making additional preparations for the session, allow time to pray for each participant and for yourself.
- Write on a chalkboard, on a dry-erase board, or on newsprint on a flip chart the heading "Top Five Things You Should Know about the Desert Elders." Beneath the heading, make the following list:
 1. Lifestyle inspired by life and teachings of Jesus
 2. Primacy of love
 3. Matthew 22:37–40 and 1 Thessalonians 5:17
 4. Spiritual disciplines and contemplative prayer
 5. The Sayings
- Set aside three chairs for the interview during "Exploring."
- Create as much space as possible in the center of the room, so participants can form a wide circle for the

Session at a Glance

OPENING

- Special prayer

EXPLORING

- Top five things
- Interview with *abbas* and *ammas*
- Questioning the audience

RESPONDING

- Praying the Great Commandment

CLOSING

- Praying Dorotheos's Prayer

"Opening" and "Closing" activities. At the center of the circle, place a candle that can be lit once everyone has gathered. Depending on space and safety issues, you may decide to extinguish the candle at the end of the opening prayer and then relight it for "Closing." Or you may choose to keep the candle lit throughout the session.

Goal for the Session

The purpose of this session is to introduce participants to the desert fathers and mothers and to encourage them to appreciate the desert elders' contribution to Christian spirituality. The session has also been designed to correct common misperceptions about this movement, particularly the ascetic lifestyle. As a result of this session, participants should be able to identify the religious

legacy of the *abbas* and *ammas* and be able to apply what they have learned for their own spiritual growth.



Teaching Tip

Spirituality is a lived experience. It is also about being vulnerable before God. Role-plays, interviews, and group discussion can clarify issues and enhance understanding, but participants will also need time to pray. Offering an opportunity for silent prayer encourages self-awareness and closeness to God while respecting participants' privacy.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Special Prayer

Light the candle, and say: To understand the Great Commandment—You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself—one of the desert fathers, Dorotheos of Gaza, suggested that we imagine a circle. At the center is God, and on the circumference is the world. Each of us has a direct line to God that can be drawn from the outside of the circle to the center. As we follow our own line toward God, we notice that all the lines of our brothers and sisters come closer together the closer we get to the center. Dorotheos said, “This is the way human beings relate to God and to one another, for the closer we are to God, the closer we become to one another, and the closer we are to one another, the closer we become to God.”

In silence, I invite you to make a wide circle around the perimeter of the room, keeping the candle as the center. The candle represents God. In silence, every time I take a step forward, you will take a step forward, too. When we are closest to God and one another, I will lead us in an opening prayer.

When participants are shoulder to shoulder, pray:

God of light, your flame beckons us, and we long to draw close to you. Be with us in our study of the desert elders, that we might come to understand you and the nature of your love. Keep us ever mindful that as we draw closer to you, we draw closer to one another. **Amen.**

Exploring (25 minutes)

2. Top Five Things

Invite participants to be seated. Make sure each one has a copy of the Participant Handout.

Invite the group to look at the board or newsprint with “Top Five Things You Should Know . . .” It is appropriate to say a few words about each item on the list, based on your own reading of the handout.

3. Interview with Abbas/Ammas

Let participants know that they are in for a special treat, as you have arranged to have two desert elders talk about their lives in the desert some 1,700 years ago and what that means for Christians today. As the elders come forward, move three chairs to the front so everyone can see and hear your conversation.

Introduce your “guests” as Abba (man’s first name) and/or Amma (woman’s first name). For example, if Claude Smith and Sarah Jones are playing the roles, you would introduce them as Abba Claude and Amma Sarah.

Welcome your guests, invite them to be seated, and ask them the following questions. After each question is the section of the Participant Handout where the elders can find the answers. Each answer should take about ninety seconds. If you think the answers will run long, you may want to choose just four or five that would be most important to your group.

- Why did you leave your home and head to the desert? “The Retreat to the Desert”
- What is life like in the desert? “The Ascetic Lifestyle”
- How much did the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth influence your decision to move to the desert? “Inspired!”
- From all I’ve read, it seems that you considered your vocation to be love. How do you define love? “The Primacy of Love”
- What does the Great Commandment mean to you? “The Primacy of Love”
- What constitutes your work each day as an expression of love? “Labor of Love”
- If to pray is to love, can you describe your prayer life? “To Pray Is to Love”
- Knowing that you take the Great Commandment seriously, how do you love your neighbor as yourself? “Love Overflowing”
- What can you tell us about the Sayings? “Love Overflowing” and “A Saying from Amma Syncletica”

4. Questioning the Audience

Thank your interviewees, and indicate that if the group has questions, the Participant Handout will tell them more. Then invite your guests to ask the group the following questions for a discussion that you will moderate:

- Given that this is the twenty-first century, and your lives are different from ours, how do you live out love?
- How do you practice love at work? In your family? At church? In our community? In the world?

Responding (10 minutes)

5. Praying the Great Commandment

Invite the class to be still and silent and to close their eyes. Read aloud Matthew 22:37–40. Ask them to consider in the silence of their hearts what word jumps out at them and then to tend to that word for a few moments. Suggest that they say the word inwardly as they inhale and that they say “ah” silently as they exhale.

After two minutes, read the Scripture passage again. This time ask them what phrase stands out. Invite them to tend to the phrase in the silence of their heart for a few moments.

After two minutes, read the Scripture passage a third time and ask: what is God’s word or message for you today in the Great Commandment? Invite them to tend to the question and their own answer in the silence of their heart for a few moments.

After two minutes say: Amen.

Closing (5 minutes)

6. Praying Dorotheos’s Prayer

The group will repeat the ritual action of moving from the outside to the center of the circle. This time, rather than move in silence, consider singing “Ubi Caritas” (#49 in *Songs & Prayers from Taizé*) or the first verse of “Blest Be the Tie That Binds” (#557 in the *United Methodist Hymnal*, #438 in the *Presbyterian Hymnal*).

Invite participants to find a place on the outer circumference of the room and to gaze at the candle in the center. Make sure the candle is lit, and say:

Come, let us remember what Dorotheos of Gaza taught about what it means to pray the Great Com-

mandment: “This is the way human beings relate to God and to each other, for the closer we are to God, the closer we become to one another, and the closer we are to one another, the closer we become to God.”

Invite participants to move toward the center as they did earlier, this time singing “Ubi Caritas” three times or “Blest Be the Tie That Binds.” When the song is finished, pause for a moment of silence and say: Amen.

Teaching Alternatives

- Ask group members to read silently “The Primacy of Love” in the Participant Handout. Invite them to take five minutes to write about love in their journal or on paper you have supplied—how they define love, what it means to them, how their ideas are similar to and different from those in “The Primacy of Love.” Divide into three groups. Invite the first group to read and discuss “Labor of Love,” the second group “To Pray Is to Love,” and the third group “Love Overflowing.” Encourage them to consider how they might practice love in our twenty-first-century context, particularly as it relates to work, family, church, community, and/or the world. Invite the three groups to come back together as a large group. Ask each group to summarize what they learned from the handout, and then open the discussion to the large group.
- *By Way of the Desert* features daily readings from the Sayings, compiled and modernized by Bernard Bangle. Locate a copy of the book and pass it around the room, inviting each participant to choose his or her birthday and read aloud the Saying for that day. Pause between readings and discuss what each Saying means.
- Determine if the group would like to explore the desert tradition in more depth by studying and discussing *To Pray & to Love* by Roberta Bondi or *Praying with the Desert Mothers* by Mary Forman.

For More Information

Bernard Bangle, *By Way of the Desert: 365 Daily Readings* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2007). Collection of short sayings for reading and praying.

Roberta C. Bondi, *To Pray & to Love: Conversations on Prayer with the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991). Historical background on the desert fathers and mothers, prayer, and Christian spirituality.

Mary Forman, *Praying with the Desert Mothers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005). Historical background on the desert mothers, with reflection for prayer and meditation.

David G. R. Keller, *Oasis of Wisdom: The Worlds of the Desert Fathers and Mothers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005). Historical, religious, and cultural background of the desert elders.

Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions,

1970). Historical background on the desert fathers, with some of their sayings.

Key Scriptures

Matthew 22:37–40

Luke 4:1–13

1 Thessalonians 5:17