

2007–2008
Horizons Bible Study

Above and Beyond
 Hearing God's Call in Jonah and Ruth

Workshop for Leaders

By Joyce MacKichan Walker

What is this?

A lesson plan for introducing the 2007–2008 *Horizons Bible study* to Presbyterian Women or any group that plans to use this study

Who is this for and why?

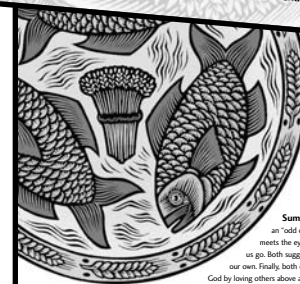
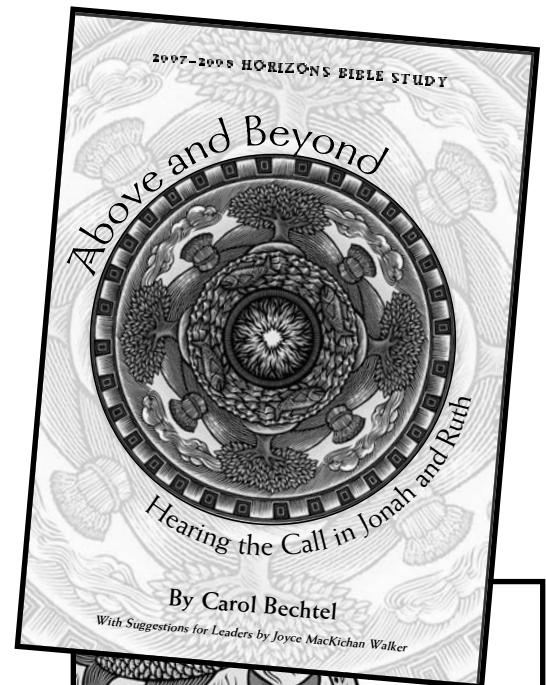
- A gathering of Presbyterian Women in the congregation, to introduce the study and generate interest and enthusiasm for upcoming circle meetings
- A gathering of Presbyterian Women in the presbytery, to introduce the study to leaders at the congregational level

Main idea

The books of *Jonah* and *Ruth* offer stories of people called by God to play a part in God's salvation history—for God's chosen people Israel and, through them, for the whole world (*Genesis 12:3b*). In exploring these two stories we will see God's steadfast love shown in ways that may surprise even those of us who have known them for a lifetime. As we experience these stories—for the first time or anew—we are invited to examine our own call and to explore what it can mean for our lifelong journey of faith.

Materials needed

- Hymnals
- Newsprint and markers
- Pens or pencils for each participant
- Copies of handouts
- Bibles
- Tables for "Invite" activity and "Investigate" activity
- Man's sneaker
- Boat
- Big fish
- Plant
- Sample of a family tree
- Barley
- Man's sandal
- Crown



Ruth for
 All They're
 Worth

Scripture: *Jonah and Ruth*

Summary: At first glance, *Jonah* and *Ruth* may seem like an "odd couple." Yet the books have more in common than meets the eye. Both bear witness to a God whose love will not let us go. Both suggest that God's mind may, in fact, be broader than our own. Finally, both call us to a deeper commitment of faith that serves God by loving others above and beyond the call of duty.

1
 LESSON

Key idea: The books of *Jonah* and *Ruth* have a lot in common, and in order to read them for all they're worth, we need to appreciate them on their own terms.

Our expectations must match the material if we are to appreciate the books of *Jonah* and *Ruth*. One doesn't read a treasurer's report with the same set of expectations as a love letter, after all. So part of this lesson will address what to read these two Hebrew books as. Are they primarily intended as history or as story, or as something else altogether? What is the difference, and how does each relate to truth and inspiration?

Finally, we'll remind ourselves that reading the Bible is always a cross-cultural experience. That means we're always going to encounter things that seem strange from a modern Western perspective. In *Ruth*, for instance, we have to wonder over the relevance of a book that assumes a woman's security is dependent on her attachment to a man. Such hurdles to appreciating both books are significant. Once they are acknowledged, however, they become much less likely to trip us up.

An Odd Couple?

Most people wouldn't think of studying the books of *Jonah* and *Ruth* together. Their main characters couldn't be more different. *Jonah* is a reluctant prophet from the time of the divided monarchy (eighth century BCE). *Ruth* is the great-grandmother of King David and hails from the time of the judges (eleventh to twelfth centuries BCE).

Lesson Plan

As people gather

Invite someone to play the hymns suggested for each lesson. Make hymnals available and invite people to participate in an informal hymn-sing as participants gather. Mention that these hymns connect with the stories of *Jonah* and *Ruth* (see insert, “More Ways to Connect with *Jonah* and *Ruth*”)

Invite

Welcome participants and tell them they are about to explore the 2007–2008 *Horizons* Bible study, published by and for Presbyterian Women. As a part of the discovery process, participants will use this time to focus on God’s call to them to recognize and experience God’s steadfast love and to participate in God’s plan for the salvation of the whole world.

Tell participants you have eight items representing the stories of *Jonah* and *Ruth*. Ask them to sort them onto two tables, four for each story. Since these are familiar stories, it is likely that some of those present will know the stories well enough to associate each item with its story. If not, don’t worry. The purpose of the activity is to engage their curiosity about the stories. Stand at the table while they work and listen to the conversation around the division of the items. It will give you a sense of how much participants know about these stories. Then invite them to share aloud what each article represents and in which story. Don’t make corrections or give the “right answers.”

Hearing multiple guesses is part of the fun and one of the ways you are piquing their interest in these stories and their details. For a very large group, provide multiple sets of the items so all can participate in the sorting.

Say, “This year’s study will take us through the books of *Jonah* and *Ruth* chapter by chapter—an introduction to them in Lesson 1, then four lessons on *Jonah* and four lessons on *Ruth*. In Lesson 1, the author will claim the books of *Jonah* and *Ruth* have these three themes in common:

1. A God who loves us with a determination that defies all logic
2. God’s mind is broader than our own.
3. A common potential for calling us to deeper commitment in faith

In this introduction, we will begin to explore these themes, so that we are ready to examine them more carefully during the study and think about how they matter to us individually and as a community of faith.”

Inform

First common theme: A God who loves us with a determination that defies all logic

Beginning in Lesson 1, the author holds up *chesed*, God’s steadfast love, as a central theme of these two books. Using these references as a guide, introduce the idea of *chesed* with a definition and some claims the author will make about *chesed* in *Jonah* and *Ruth*. Invite participants to watch for this theme throughout the study and to reflect each time they are together on how God has shown God’s “steadfast love” to them.

If time allows, point out some of the places in this study where this theme is lifted up. Otherwise, consider posting this list somewhere in the room (for participants to copy if they choose), or create a handout that participants can take with them to refer to later.

- Introduction—Paragraph two
- Lesson 1—In “An Odd Couple,” the first thing these two books have in common: “Both books bear witness to a God who loves us with a determination that defies all logic.”
- Lesson 2—In “Word Association, “. . . [G]race is what the book of *Jonah* is all

ITEMS REPRESENTING *JONAH*

Man’s sneaker (symbolizes Jonah running away)

Boat

Picture of a big fish

Plant (for the plant in chapter four that grows up and withers)

ITEMS REPRESENTING *RUTH*

Sample of a family tree

(for the genealogy that connects this family to King David)

Barley (for the gleaning and the threshing floor)

Man’s sandal (for the sandal ceremony in chapter four)

Crown (for King David, Obed’s descendant)

about, and grace is itself a symptom of something even more central; God's steadfast love—love that 'goes above and beyond the call of duty.'"

- Lesson 5—In the summary “. . . [S]teadfast love’ (Hebrew *chesed*) is the most important component of God’s character. This love, which ‘goes above and beyond the call of duty,’ is the explanation behind the extravagant burst of grace that we saw in *Jonah 3 . . .*” In “God’s Most Petulant Prophet,”: “As we’ll discover when we study the book of *Ruth*, God’s ‘steadfast love’ (*chesed* in Hebrew) is the most important component of God’s character. It is love that goes ‘above and beyond the call of duty.’ It is the love that led to Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. It is the love that will not let us go.”
- Lesson 6—See the last section of this chapter, “Above and Beyond the Call of Duty,” which is a major place where this theme is lifted up.
- Lesson 7—See “Back from the Brink,” paragraphs two and three, and note *Ruth 2:20*, “Blessed be he [Boaz] by the LORD, whose kindness [*chesed*] has not forsaken the living or the dead.”

See also the entry “loving-kindness” in *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*¹, or another Bible dictionary to which you have access.

Investigate

Second common theme: God’s mind is broader than our own.

Say, “The second common theme that the author highlights is, ‘God’s mind is broader than our own.’ In fact, the author says, ‘[T]heir shared fascination with foreigners and their openness to the fact that God could actually love such foreigners is one of the things that makes these two Old Testament books so unusual and so alike’” (“An Odd Couple,” Lesson 1).

In order to draw the contrast between God’s mind and our own, display several newspapers on tables, especially sections that have national/international news. Ask participants to form groups of four, then

find one newspaper story between them which indicates an inclination not to believe God could love foreigners or enemies. (Suggestion: One way to search for articles is to look for stories about those we might personally find it hard to love, or stories that identify groups that seem to be in constant conflict with one another. If participants need some prompting, suggest the issues of immigration, genocide, civil war, and racism as examples of issues in which people often claim God is on their side—i.e., God loves us and not them.)

When groups have their example, invite each group to name it using this formula:

“_____ against _____,” to which the group is invited to respond “God forgive us. You love when we choose not to.”

When all groups have named their example, invite participants, as they hear similar stories in the months ahead, to ponder the enemies or foreigners we are tempted to think God either doesn’t, or ought not to, love.

Illustrate

Third common theme: *Jonah* and *Ruth* share a common potential for calling us to deeper commitment in faith.

Say, “The title of this study includes the phrase ‘Hearing God’s Call.’ This does not imply Presbyterian women have not already heard God’s call, or are not already responding faithfully to God in all walks of life. We know they are! But no matter what our starting point is, we can explore God’s call for greater understanding of what we are called to say, to do, and to be.”

Provide a definition of *call*, drawing on the author’s broad description in the introduction, of the varieties of ways one might experience *call* and respond:

- “Take a step of faith and find out what it means to give your life to Christ.”
- “Discover new ways that God wants to work in and through you.”
- Go “further up and further in”—deepen one’s exploration and response.

1 *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 581; p. 627 in second edition, 1996.

Read aloud the paragraph in the introduction that begins, “In short, every Christian has a call . . .” and tell participants that in each lesson, some aspect of the discussion of God’s call will surface. Invite them to participate in this exercise as a way to begin thinking about their own call from God.

Give each participant a copy of the handout “Exploring My Call.” Tell them these statements about call have been taken from the Bible study lessons, so they can expect to have an opportunity to explore them in greater depth later. Ask them to follow the directions and, when they have finished, to find someone else who is done and talk to that person about one statement of their choice, saying why they agree or disagree and relating something of their own experience to it.

Inspire

Say, “The author says in Lesson 1, ‘Reading *Jonah* and *Ruth* may cause Christians to reevaluate their level of commitment. If you don’t want to hear the call to go above

and beyond the call of duty in your faith, avoid these two books like the plague.’ I am grateful you are beginning this exploration of *Jonah* and *Ruth*. As you do so, I invite you to turn with me to the end of Lesson 4, and read aloud with me the last two lines, beginning with the words, ‘I pray that God will guide you . . .’ As you do so, look at one another. This is our charge to one another, and our prayer for each other and for ourselves as we begin this study of *Jonah* and *Ruth* and of our call to be God’s faithful people.”

At the end of the unison prayer, invite them to enter into this study eager to have the Holy Spirit put us “in much better shape to hear and say yes to the call!” (from the Introduction).

Joyce MacKichan Walker wrote *Suggestions for Leaders* for the 2007–2008 *Horizons* Bible study, *Above and Beyond: Hearing God’s Call in Jonah and Ruth*. She is minister of Christian education at Nassau Presbyterian Church in Princeton, New Jersey.

Additional Activities

Activity 1

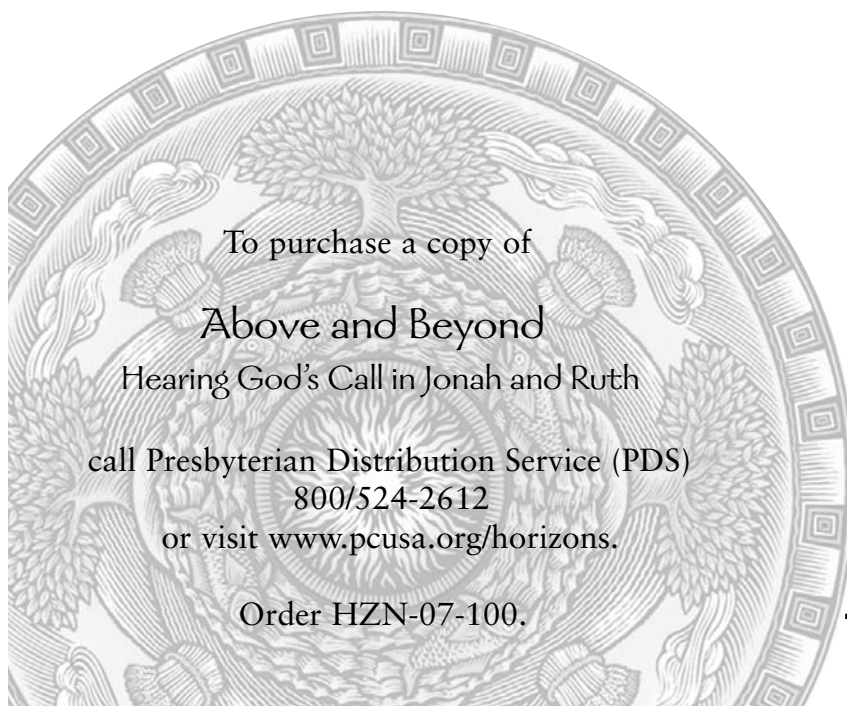
Distribute copies of the handout, “Themes from Suggestions for Leaders.”

Ask participants to skim the list and select two themes they find particularly interesting. Once they have made their selections, divide participants into nine groups based on their chosen lesson/theme, attempting to create relatively equal groups and get everyone grouped by one of their two choices. Then ask participants to briefly share with their small group something about their personal situation that made them select this lesson/theme. Note: The point is not to talk about the lesson, but to highlight the connections these books have with our personal lives, and to heighten anticipation for the study sessions.

Activity #2

Ask participants to choose *Jonah* or *Ruth*, then look at the art used in the lessons, based on their book of choice. Working in pairs, ask participants, as they look at the art provided in the Bible study, to respond to these two questions:

1. What do you see that reminds you of the story it represents?
2. What images in the art intrigue you because you wonder how they illustrate the story?



Exploring My Call

Place an X on the continuum under each statement, to indicate the extent of your agreement with it.

1. "Hearing God's call involves more than just our ears; it demands 'our soul, our life, our all'" (from Lesson 2).
STRONGLY AGREE

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
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 STRONGLY DISAGREE

2. "When God calls, we're used to a little resistance" (from Lesson 2).
STRONGLY AGREE

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
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 STRONGLY DISAGREE

3. "God's grace does not always wait for us to be worthy or even to be wise enough to see what God is doing" (from Lesson 3).
STRONGLY AGREE

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
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 STRONGLY DISAGREE

4. "God's purposes are accomplished even through the most imperfect people" (from Lesson 4).
STRONGLY AGREE

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
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 STRONGLY DISAGREE

5. "Many of us assume that we haven't got much to offer God. We are so aware of other people's gifts and our own imperfections that it is often easier to make excuses than to answer God's call" (from Lesson 4).
STRONGLY AGREE

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
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 STRONGLY DISAGREE

6. "God works not only through us, but often in spite of us" (from Lesson 4).
STRONGLY AGREE

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
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 STRONGLY DISAGREE

7. "God's love pursues us, even if we are, for whatever reason, trying to resist it" (from Lesson 6).
STRONGLY AGREE

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
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 STRONGLY DISAGREE

8. "As we seek to be faithful to God's call, and as we seek to trust a God who sometimes seems absent, ... [we must] look for God's hand in the 'divine coincidences' of our own story" (from Lesson 7).
STRONGLY AGREE

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
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 STRONGLY DISAGREE

9. "Part of hearing God's call, then, is being willing to act faithfully in everyday situations. For all we know, our everyday actions may play a role in a providential design" (from Lesson 7).
STRONGLY AGREE

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
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 STRONGLY DISAGREE

10. "The true test of both calling and character is whether we can trust God and act faithfully in the face of uncertainty" (from Lesson 8).
STRONGLY AGREE

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
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 STRONGLY DISAGREE

11. "God sometimes uses the faithfulness of ordinary people to bring extraordinary blessing. . . . We see how important it is . . . to hear—and obey—God's call" (From Lesson 9).
STRONGLY AGREE

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
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 STRONGLY DISAGREE

12. "Faithfulness to God's call is a high-stakes matter. We can never know how much depends on our willingness to go above and beyond" (from Lesson 9).
STRONGLY AGREE

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

 STRONGLY DISAGREE

Themes from Suggestions for Leaders

Lesson 1 (An Introduction to *Jonah* and *Ruth*)

Reading *Jonah* and *Ruth* for All They're Worth

Theme: To gain new insights into our lives of faith, we must see the theological truths the writers of *Jonah* and *Ruth* illumine. Both of these books help us look at the world and our relationship to it as God intends.

Lesson 2 (*Jonah* 1)

Reluctant Prophets and Faithful Foreigners

Theme: God's holding on to us may be less dramatic than the big fish rescue of *Jonah*, but it is no less true, and no less significant. Our task is to consider how we will faithfully respond to God's love for us.

Lesson 3 (*Jonah* 2)

Taking Up Space in a Fish Named Grace

Theme: When faced with descent into the depths, *Jonah* discovers he does not want to flee from God's presence; he just wants to relate to God on his own terms. This is evident in our own lives when we think we know what God should do for us. However, God knows us better than we know ourselves.

Lesson 4 (*Jonah* 3)

Once More, with Feeling?

Theme: *Jonah* trusts neither his ability to preach to the Ninevites nor God's preference to show them mercy. We also make excuses to avoid God's call and find it hard to comprehend how completely God forgives and loves us.

Lesson 5 (*Jonah* 4)

God's Extravagant Grace

Theme: Only God is in a position to judge who is "in" and who is "out." The love God shows us is the same love God has for the whole of the world. Our call is to willingly, intentionally, and passionately extend that love to God's world ourselves.

Lesson 6 (*Ruth* 1)

Love that Goes Above and Beyond the Call of Duty

Theme: Expressions of *chesed*, between God, ourselves, and others keep us grounded in what it means to be God's children and disciples.

Lesson 7 (*Ruth* 2)

Back from the Brink

Theme: God's activity in our lives is not always clear. When we listen for God's call and attempt to respond faithfully, we become more aware of God's presence in "divine coincidences."

Lesson 8 (*Ruth* 3)

In God We Trust?

Theme: *Ruth* and *Boaz* demonstrate love that goes above and beyond the call of duty. God calls us to do likewise, especially when faced with situations that require change.

Lesson 9 (*Ruth* 4)

Ordinary People

Theme: *Ruth*, *Naomi*, and *Boaz* are ordinary people who use their trust in God, personal initiative, and faithful wisdom to respond to their circumstances. We, too, are called to trust and to act.

More Ways to Connect with *Jonah* and *Ruth*

Sing Your Faith

Incorporate music into your study of *Jonah* and *Ruth*. The following hymns can be found in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1990).

Lesson 1 (*Jonah and Ruth*)

#419, “How Clear Is Our Vocation, Lord”

This hymn picks up the clear focus on “call” highlighted in this Bible study. For example, verse three refers to saints who became “in hindrances more sure”—maybe not Jonah, but Ruth! Verse four is a wonderful call to look to Christ “in old routines” and “ventures new” (such as this study!).

Lesson 2 (*Jonah 1*)

#289, “O God of Every Nation”

This hymn is a wonderful match for the study’s focus on faithful foreigners—“From pride of race and station . . . deliver every nation.” It would also work for Lesson 5.

or

#100, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”

Carol Bechtel refers to verse four of this hymn—hearing God’s call demands “our soul, our life, our all.”

Lesson 3 (*Jonah 2*)

#277, “O God, Our Faithful God”

This hymn seems perfect for this lesson, especially verses two and three. “God, grant us strength to do. . . whatever you command . . . when we ought . . . If dangers gather round . . . with words and actions kind.” Imagine Jonah having to sing this one!

or

#240, “Out of the Depths”

This is a fitting psalm of lamentation.

Lesson 4 (*Jonah 3*)

#184, “How Blest Are Those”

This hymn picks up a number of connections to *Jonah*. Verse one connects to the Ninevites, “whose great sin has freely been forgiven.” Jonah can be heard in verses two and three, “While I kept guilty silence . . . I made confession . . . you gave me life anew . . . No storm or flood shall reach them.” Look at verse four and imagine God saying this to Jonah—“I graciously will teach you the way that you should go. . . [B]e not then unruly, or slow to understand; be not perverse, but willing to heed my wise command.”

Lesson 5 (*Jonah 4*)

#471, “O Praise the Gracious Power”

These words are an obvious match, with their focus on openness and inclusiveness, and “[p]ersistent truth that opens fist-d minds. . . . Announce the gospel to the world”—words for Jonah and for us!

Lesson 6 (*Ruth 1*)

#407, “Cuando el Pobre” (“When a Poor One”)

This hymn has two features worth lifting up. First is the chorus, “Then we know that God still goes that road with us”—a beautiful image of God walking this story/road with Naomi and Ruth (and with us). It also contains images of *chesed*—steadfast love shown to others.

Participants could revisit verse two of this hymn when studying Lesson 9, “When at last all those who suffer find their comfort, when they hope though even hope seems hopelessness . . .” And verse four frames the family/genealogy focus, “When our homes are filled with goodness in abundance, when we learn how to make peace instead of war, when each stranger that we meet is called a neighbor, then we know that God still goes that road with us.”

Lesson 7 (*Ruth 2*)

#286, “Give to the Winds Thy Fears”

This hymn of encouragement in time of trouble is a match for this continuing story.

Lesson 8 (*Ruth 3*)

#282, “If Thou but Trust in God to Guide Thee”

Again, encouragement for the journey, and exhortation to “do thine own part faithfully” and “trust the rich promises of grace, so shall they be fulfilled in thee.”

Lesson 9 (*Ruth 4*)

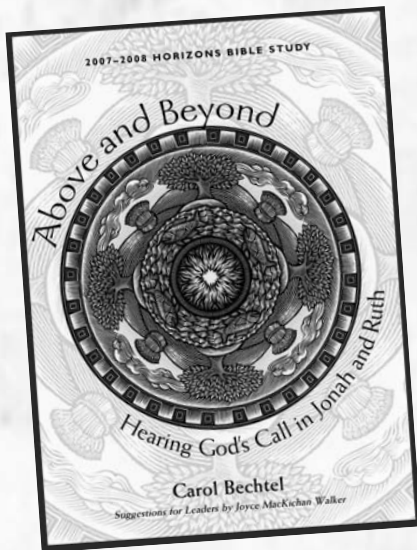
#275, “God of Our Life”

The present, past and future focus of this hymn is a great match to learning from these stories so we might be faithful today, and trust for tomorrow, “when all our years have sped.”

or

#285, “God, You Spin the Whirling Planets”

Another option, filled with nature images—just as *Jonah* has the sea and the plant, and *Ruth* has harvest-related images. It takes us to “our ministry”—worship and community—and ends by focusing on “work to dare and do . . . polish[ed] . . . with loving care.”



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Rosalind Banbury, associate pastor for adult ministries at First Presbyterian, Richmond, Virginia, is writing helps for the 2007–2008 *Horizons* Bible study, *Above and Beyond: Hearing God's Call in Jonah and Ruth* for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. Each article provides additional information and perspective on the scripture passage or portion of the passage being studied, related contemporary issues or stories, and additional questions for reflection. Rosalind says, "Scripture is amazing. Even with familiar stories there are always new discoveries." Rosalind graduated from Union Theological Seminary & Presbyterian School of Christian Education and has served as a pastor in congregations ranging from 75 to 1,600 members. She enjoys helping people explore the meaning of scripture for their lives. Look for her articles beginning with the August 13, 2007 issue of *The Presbyterian Outlook*.

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