

Cloud of Witnesses: The Community of Christ in Hebrews

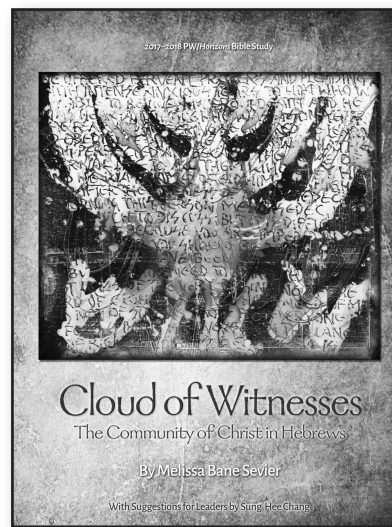
2017–2018 PW/*Horizons* Bible Study by Melissa Bane Sevier

Workshop for Leaders

By Betsy Ensign-George

Welcome to the 2017–2018 Presbyterian Women/*Horizons* Bible study, *Cloud of Witnesses: The Community of Christ in Hebrews*. In nine lessons, author Melissa Bane Sevier invites us to explore major themes found in Hebrews, relate these themes to other parts of our faith tradition, and tie them together with the overarching motif of *community*.

The community for which the letter, or homily, was written interacts, in a sense, with all communities of which we are a part, as we bring these groups with us wherever we go. This ever-present “great cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1) strengthens and encourages us as we “run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:1b–2).



Lessons begin and end with a hymn and a prayer, and include discussion questions that help build community. “So Great a Cloud of Witnesses” stories, submitted by Presbyterian women, follow each lesson.

Lesson One focuses on Hebrews’ emphasis throughout the book that Jesus, the Christ, is the basis of all of our faith and action, individually and as a faith community.

Lesson Two reminds us that God lives both in us and among us, and that this living God supports who we are and how we live.

Lesson Three points out that Hebrews describes God’s word as both living and active. God’s word challenges, supports, and encourages us to look inward and live the most faithful lives we can.

Lesson Four takes us on a tour of angelic messengers in the Bible, and reminds us that we never know when an encounter may bring us God’s messages of love and support.

Lesson Five helps us remember the things our ancestors in the faith have bequeathed to us. The

faith tradition supports us by showing us both the successes and stumbles of biblical characters. We also have our own *Book of Confessions* that guides us in our Reformed tradition.

Lesson Six considers how communities of faith support each other during troubled times. Hebrews was written to a people suffering under persecution.

Lesson Seven centers our attention on God’s Sabbath rest, where we find hope and support for the future, as well as our current situation.

Lesson Eight examines the household of faith that reminds us of our supportive home with each other in God.

Lesson Nine highlights the great cloud of witnesses from the past and present who show us how to live in faith and who support us in faithful living.

***Cloud of Witnesses* timeline**

- Theme chosen: February 2013
- Author chosen: February 2014
- Field tested: Fall 2015
- Revised/rewritten/final draft: January–August 2016
- Published: March 2017

Begin the Workshop

Welcome participants to the PW/*Horizons* Bible study, *Cloud of Witnesses: The Community of Christ in Hebrews*, the Bible study written by Presbyterian women for Presbyterian Women. If participants are early, invite them to help set up.

Open with a hymn and a prayer. Each lesson begins and ends with a spoken or sung hymn and a prayer. To open the workshop we're using the hymn and prayers from Lesson Three, "In Community with the Living Word" (p. 27):

Sing or read (from the hymn "O Word of God Incarnate," GtG¹ 459 or PH 327):

O Word of God incarnate,
O Wisdom from on high,

**O Truth unchanged, unchanging,
O Light of our dark sky:**

we praise you for the radiance
that from the hallowed page,

**a lantern to our footsteps,
shines on from age to age.**

Ask: What do you bring to [our workshop] today?

Pray: God of our hearts, may your living and active word pierce deeply into our souls where it can call forth from us love, faith, unity, and action. Amen.

Invite participants to introduce themselves and tell the group where they worship.

Introduce the *Cloud of Witnesses* authors and artist. Biographies of the author, Melissa Bane Sevier; the Suggestions for Leaders writer, Sung Hee Chang; and the artist, Irene Kordalis Pedersen, are on page one of the study book and on the poster attached to the middle of the book. Read the bios from the study book or poster.

***Cloud of Witnesses: The Community of Christ in Hebrews* is a thematic study of the book of Hebrews.** Melissa explores scripture from every chapter of Hebrews, but she does so thematically, not sequentially. We look at some Hebrews passages in more than one lesson, because the passages may relate to more than one theme. Books in both testaments are examined.

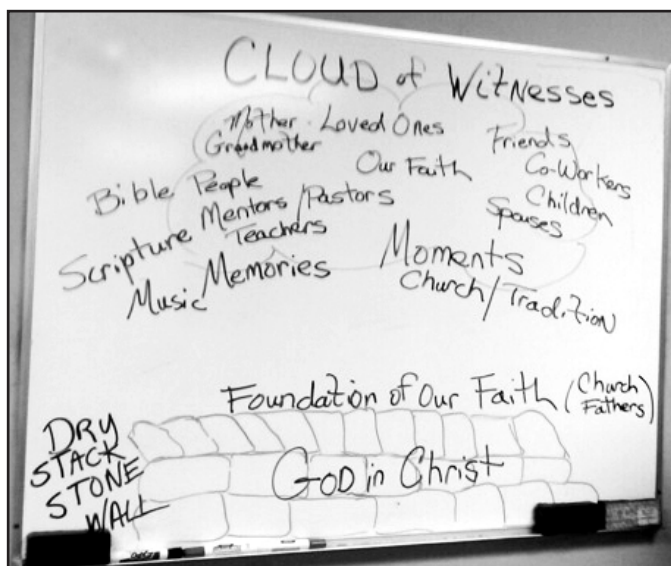
Melissa uses images to illustrate the community of Christ in Hebrews. Two images stayed with Melissa as she wrote *Cloud of Witnesses*: the image of clouds and the image of dry-stack stone fences. Look at the picture on page five in the study book. Melissa took this photo. The dry-stack stone fence in the picture is in her backyard. Melissa lives in the Bluegrass region of Central Kentucky, where nearly every road or farm that's been around for a while has a dry-stack stone fence. These dry-stack stone fences were assembled with rocks that farmers found in their cleared fields; they were assembled by fence makers who considered the shapes of the rocks at hand and placed the rocks together to form a wall that holds together without mortar. "The wall is a metaphor for being supported, the cloud for being surrounded. Community does both things for us" (p. 6).

Explore your walls of faith and your clouds of witnesses. Hand out the stone fence with clouds coloring page (copy page 5 of this workshop) plus writing and coloring supplies. Ask participants to write the names of things that make up their foundations of faith on the rocks in the dry-stack

1. Hymns marked (GtG) are from *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013). Hymns marked (PH) are from *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1990).

stone fence wall, then ask them to write the names of people who are in their clouds of witnesses on the clouds. Give participants five minutes to add their faith foundation things and clouds of witnesses names; they can color the picture later, either during or after the workshop.

Bring the group back together and ask participants about what they added to their pictures. What things make up their faith foundation walls? They might have written the Bible, confessional statements, prayers, hymns, friendships, their faith community, and more. Ask them who makes up their clouds of witnesses. A family member? A pastor? A beloved Sunday school teacher? Someone who expected a lot from them and helped them accomplish big things? Biblical role models?



One of the groups that field-tested *Cloud of Witnesses* drew a wall and clouds on a dry erase board and did this activity together. If you have room in your meeting space, try it that way yourselves. Or hang a piece of banner paper on a wall, or spread it out on a table or tables around which your group can gather. Write participants' answers on the stone wall and in the clouds.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, . . .” (Heb. 12:1a). “So Great a Cloud of Witnesses” stories follow each lesson.

To encourage your meditation on the people and groups who support you, after each lesson we include reflections by Presbyterian women about women who sustain them in their life and faith. The stories collected and published were written in response to a general invitation extended at the 2015 Churchwide Gathering and later through the *Quarterly Newsletter*.

Using the *Cloud of Witnesses Study Book*

The following features and activities can be described or tried, depending on your interest and the time and supplies available.

There's help to understand study content in the Scope and Sequence on page seven, the chart at the back of this workshop, and in the Suggestions for Leaders that follow each lesson. Read the “Suggestions for Leaders General Instructions” on page six, then find the Suggestions for Leaders on pages 16, 24, 34, 44, 54, 62, 72, 80, and 90. In each Suggestions for Leaders, Sung Hee Chang includes a section on the lesson theme. You might want to read the theme section before you read each lesson, and definitely before you lead a lesson. Sung Hee highlights quotes from the lesson and offers ways to understand the meaning of the lesson.

The sections in the Suggestions for Leaders are: Opening, The Theme, Community Bible Study (with ways to study the scripture with your study group), A Christian Practice (nine ways to explore faith through different Christian practices), and Closing.

Another resource that helps with content is the Main Points and Lesson Summaries resource. It isn't in the study but it is available as a download on the companion DVD and on the *Horizons* website. The PW website is under construction at this writing, so start at www.presbyterianwomen.org and click on the *Horizons* magazine and Bible study tab in the left-hand column to get to our temporary *Horizons* site. Susan Jackson Dowd, PW executive director, prepares this resource before she goes out to lead Bible study workshops at PW events. It is thorough and helpful.

The art that illustrates *Cloud of Witnesses* was created by Irene Kordalis Pedersen. Irene uses words and images from scripture, and layers them on her canvases. You could try doing a basic version of what Irene does yourselves. Start with a firm base (cardstock, cardboard, poster board, scrap wood, or other firm medium), write passages from Hebrews on torn pieces of paper, then use diluted school or crafting glue and a foam paintbrush to glue the words to the base. When dry, use watercolors to paint over the words so that they are highlighted but can still be read, or use the diluted glue and foam paintbrush method to add layers of torn tissue paper with layers of words. Go to www.irenekordalispedersen.com to see more of the real thing.

“So Great a Cloud of Witnesses” stories, mentioned earlier, can be found on pages 17, 25, 35, 45, 55, 63, 73, 81, and 91. Find the stories and read them. Who are the women in your cloud of witnesses? Consider writing down their stories as you study *Cloud of Witnesses*. You could make a group scrapbook with their photos and stories. Invite everyone in your congregation to participate. People of all ages could enjoy writing or dictating stories, and contributing, taking, or drawing pictures of their own cloud of witnesses.

Melissa asks good questions. You’ll find questions throughout *Cloud of Witnesses*. You can answer these questions as you read the study or when you study it together as a group. We’ve left space in the study book for you to write down your reflections. Melissa hopes that discussing the study will help your group build community.

***Cloud of Witnesses* fits with the liturgical calendar.** Presbyterian women use *PW/Horizons* Bible studies throughout the year, but many groups start in September and meet monthly until May. Lesson Four, “In Community with God’s Messengers,” is about angels as messengers. If you start *Cloud of Witnesses* in September, Lesson Four will fall in December during Advent. Consider ways you might tie the theme of angels to the liturgical calendar. The Christian practice in the Suggestions for Leaders for Lesson Four is the tradition of *Las Posadas* (“The Inns” or “The Shelters”), which re-enacts the story

of Joseph and Mary seeking a place to stay in Bethlehem (Lk. 2:1–7). What if your study group put on *Las Posadas* for your church, or you invited children or youth to participate with you? What a wonderful way to build community!

As you wrap up the workshop, point out the Annotated Bibliography on page 92 in the back of the study book. The Annotated Bibliography provides a list of books for you to use to learn more. Melissa lists books about the Letter to the Hebrews and books about community. It’s more than a list—she includes notes about each book and what you can learn from it. Groups that want to dig deeper can start here for suggestions.

Ask participants to share what they discovered about *Cloud of Witnesses: The Community of Christ in Hebrews*. What will they take home?

Invite your workshop group to share contact information. They can be a community of leaders for one another.

Close with a hymn and a prayer. Each lesson begins and ends with a spoken or sung hymn and a prayer. To close the workshop, we’re using the hymn and prayers from Lesson Three, “In Community with the Living Word” (p. 33):

Sing or read (from the hymn “O Word of God Incarnate,” GtG 459 of PH 327:

O make your church, dear Savior,
a lamp of purest gold
to bear before the nations your true light,
as of old;
O teach your wandering pilgrims
by this path to trace,
till, clouds and storms thus ended,
we see you face to face.

Ask: What new challenge or hope will you take from today’s [workshop]?

Pray: God, whose word is both living and active, may that word do its work deep in our souls, so that we may go from here renewed and live our lives in its influence. Amen.



2017–2018 PW/*Horizons* Bible Study by Melissa Bane Sevier

Cloud of Witnesses: The Community of Christ in Hebrews

	Title	Scripture	Main Idea
Intro			“Preface”, “Before You Begin”, “Things to Look for in This Study”, “About the Art”, “Intro to the Study”, and the “Scope and Sequence”
1	In Community with Jesus Christ	Genesis 13:24; Genesis 1:26–27; Hebrews 1:1–4; 4:14–5:10; Genesis 14:18–20; Hebrews 7:26–28	Lesson One focuses on Hebrews’ emphasis throughout the book that <i>Jesus, the Christ, is the basis of all of our faith and action</i> , individually and as a faith community.
2	In Community with the Living God	Hebrews 1:1–4; Exodus 3:1–7; Exodus 19:16–25; Hebrews 12:18–24; 8:10; Jeremiah 31:31–34	Lesson Two reminds us that <i>God lives both in us and among us</i> , and that this living God supports who we are and how we live.
3	In Community with the Living Word	Hebrews 1:1–3a; Genesis 1:1–5; Ezekiel 37:1–14; John 1:1–5, 14; Hebrews 4:12–13	Lesson Three points out that Hebrews describes <i>God’s word as both living and active</i> . God’s word challenges, supports, and encourages us to look inward and live the most faithful lives we can.
4	In Community with God’s Messengers	Genesis 28:10–22; Daniel 3:8–30; Matthew 1:18–25; Luke 1:5–17, 1:26–38, 2:8–14; Hebrews 1:3–14; 13:1–2	Lesson Four takes us on a tour of angelic messengers in the Bible, and reminds us that <i>we never know when an encounter may bring us God’s messages of love and support</i> .
5	In Community with the Tradition of the Past	Hebrews 3:1–6; 11	Lesson Five helps us remember the things our ancestors in the faith have bequeathed to us. <i>The faith tradition supports us by showing us both the successes and stumbles of biblical characters</i> . We also have our own <i>Book of Confessions</i> that guides us in our Reformed tradition.
6	In Community with the Reality of the Present	Hebrews 2:10–18 and 10:34–35; Mark 8:31–38	Lesson Six considers how <i>communities of faith support each other during troubled times</i> . Hebrews was written to a people suffering under persecution.
7	In Community with the Hope of the Future	Hebrews 11:1–3; 3:1–19; Psalm 95; Hebrews 4:1–11 and 6:9–12	Lesson Seven centers our attention on <i>God’s Sabbath rest, where we find hope and support for the future, as well as our current situation</i> .
8	In Community with the Household of Faith	Hebrews 3:1–6; Numbers 12:7; Hebrews 13:1–6; James 2:1–4; Psalm 127:1–2	Lesson Eight examines the <i>household of faith that reminds us of our supportive home with each other in God</i> .
9	In Community with All the Saints	Hebrews 6:9–12; 13:24–25; 12:1–2; 11:35–40	Lesson Nine highlights the great <i>cloud of witnesses from the past and present</i> who show us how to live in faith and who support us in faithful living.

1. Hymns marked (GtG) are from *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013). Hymns marked (PH) are from *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1990).

With Suggestions for Leaders by Sung Hee Chang

Lesson Summary Chart from the Workshop for Leaders

S for L and Cloud of Witnesses	Hymns ¹ GtG = Glory to God PH = Presbyterian Hymnal	Notes
pp. 16–17	“Christ Is Made the Sure Foundation,” GtG 394 or PH 417; “Since Our Great High Priest, Christ Jesus,” GtG 262; “Come, Christians, Join to Sing,” GtG 267 or PH 150	
pp. 24–25	“The God of Abraham Praise,” GtG 49 or PH 488; “Walk On, O People of God,” PH 296	
pp. 34–35	“O Word of God Incarnate,” GtG 459 or PH 327	
pp. 44–45	“Angels We Have Heard on High,” GtG 113 or PH 23; “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,” GtG 123 or PH 38	
pp. 54–55	“I Sing a Song of the Saints of God,” GtG 730 or PH 364; “God of the Ages, Whose Almighty Hand,” GtG 331	
pp. 62–63	“I Will Come to You,” GtG 177	
pp. 72–73	“There Is a Place of Quiet Rest (Near to the Heart of God),” GtG 824 or PH 527; “O Day of Rest and Gladness,” GtG 393	
pp. 80–81	“We Are One in Christ Jesus (Somos uno en Cristo),” GtG 322; “Help Us Accept Each Other,” GtG 754 or PH 358	
pp. 90–91	“For All the Saints,” GtG 326 or PH 526; “God, Be the Love to Search and Keep Me (O Christ, Surround Me),” GtG 543	

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