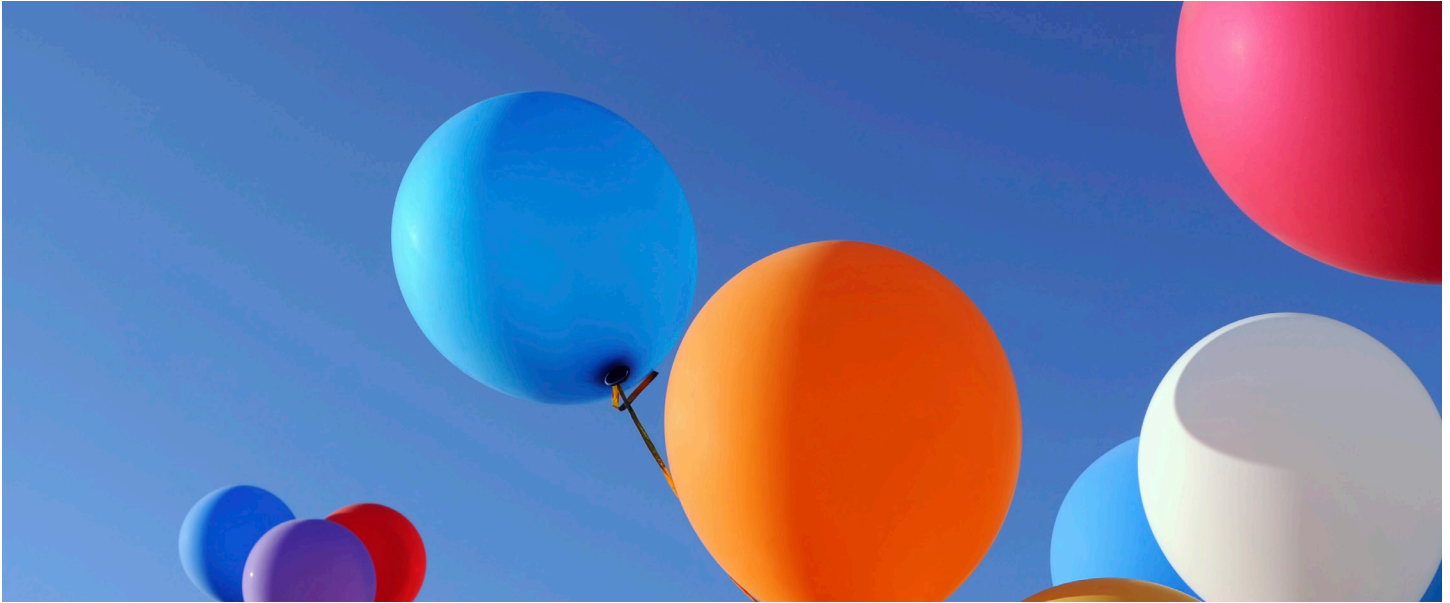


Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Discovery

About this Age Group

By the time that people reach their adult years, they may feel that they should have arrived at a point where life has a settled, certain, secure feeling. When they discover that they still must cope with transition and ever-changing circumstances, they may feel a sense of failure. Some may attempt to compensate by becoming more rigid in outlook in an effort to bring a sense of order to what feels like barely contained chaos. Nonetheless, adults can also begin to discover and make peace with the understanding that life is a journey in which the scenery is always changing, and abundant blessings can be recognized and appreciated even when life and the world in general are spinning nonstop.

About this Exploration

The concepts of blessing and letting go are not new to us. We see them in the natural world, and we experience them in our lives all the time. How we choose to relate to them, however, makes all the difference. In this Exploration we will discover how others learned to let go, thereby opening space for something new to emerge in their lives, and how they were able to find the blessing in both the challenges and the joys of life. As we explore this faith practice, we will consider the implications of blessing and letting go within our communities, churches, and the world. We may discover the freedom available to us when we are able to both embrace and release in a world of constant transition.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
1 Samuel 16:1–23
Ephesians 3:14–20

Leader Preparation

As you help group members wrestle with the changing circumstances and tough transitions of life, the most counterproductive thing you can do is to feel that you must project the sense that you have it all together. Unless you are highly unusual, you don't. Unless you are one in ten zillion plus, you never will. The greatest gift you can give the other group members is the presence of a candid, open, vulnerable human being—just like them—who is trying to journey over the treacherous terrain of life with as much humility, courage, and faith as you can muster. Rely upon the faithful, constant, non-anxious presence of the Christ who sustains you.

Prayer: God, sometimes amid the transitions of life, I do not have a firm sense of where I am, where I have been, or where I am headed. May my faith in your constant, abiding presence uphold me when I seem to have little else I can depend upon. Amen.

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Word Reactions (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: At some points in our lives, change can be longed for and welcomed. The end of a school year, for instance, sets the hearts of most children pitter-pattering with excited anticipation. In other cases, transition can fill us with anxiety and dread. Many people who have experienced the breakup of a relationship, the involuntary termination of employment, or an unexpected interruption that disrupted the anticipated course of their day will tell you that the uptick in their heart rate was more a matter of stress and strain than elation. Bear that in mind as you lead this activity. Different people will have different reactions to thoughts of change and transition, depending on what they have encountered and are experiencing in their lives.

Prior to the session, review your own feelings and reactions to transitions in your life thus far. Ask yourself the following questions: How do I instinctively respond when I hear words associated with transition? Do I tend to see transition as opportunity or oppression? Why is that the case? What transitions in my life have I experienced as positive; which ones have I experienced as negative?

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Provide participants with the following instructions, using your own words:

In just a moment I am going to ask a volunteer to stand before the group. I will ask that person to use a facial expression or a body posture to represent how he or she feels about a word I speak. For example, if I were to say the word “catastrophe,” the volunteer might cringe and look horrified. If I were to say “holiday,” that person might smile or jump for joy.

After the explanation, select a volunteer. Say the word “change” and wait for that person's expression or gesture. Then choose a different volunteer for each of the following words:

- transition
- modification
- alteration
- transformation
- metamorphosis
- newness
- innovation
- freshness

Write all the words used in the activity on newsprint or whiteboard. Ask the group members to indicate what emotions and thoughts they were picking up from the facial expressions and body postures of the participants who were reacting to the words. Invite the volunteers to clarify what they were attempting to express, where it seems appropriate.

All of these words imply—to one degree or another—the concept of change or transition. Ask: *Given that, why do you think some expressions or postures seemed negative while others seemed more positive?*

with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities using at least one activity from each category.

② Transitions Tour

Leader preparation: During this activity you will travel to a few locations in your neighborhood or community that suggest transition or change of some kind. Select six to ten locations, such as: a public park, a decaying building, a building under construction, a hospital, a cemetery, a daycare center or elementary school, a senior citizens assistance facility, an auto repair shop, a barber shop or styling salon, a plastic surgeon's office, a high school or college. Choose locations that suggest transition and change. For example, a decaying building would suggest one type of possible change in the community; a building under construction might suggest another. A public park or wooded area might suggest transitions that have to do with nature. Use your own creativity, your familiarity with your community, and your understanding of the needs and comfort levels within your group to determine what places you will visit. Your tour should take only 10–15 minutes in total. This means that a “drive by” is all you will have time for. Arrange for drivers.

Keep in mind that transitions are something that we face every day. Many of us transition from being at home in our own space to a location where we work and interact with others—and at the end of the workday we transition back again. As you lead the after-tour discussion, be sure that you encourage adults to give voice to their feelings and thoughts about everyday, routine transitions and transitions that feel more seismic, life altering, and challenging.

In anticipation of this activity, prepare a slip of paper for each participant with the following questions:

What transitions are represented by these places?

How do these transitions compare with those I am experiencing in my own life at present?

Supplies:

- planned route for the tour to distribute to drivers
- paper
- pens

Before starting out on the tour, give each participant a slip of paper with the two questions on it. Then make a statement similar to the following, using your own words:

We are going to take a brief trip to drive by locations in our area. As we take this mini-journey, I ask you to ponder two questions in particular: What transitions are represented by these places? How do these transitions compare with those I am experiencing in my own life at present?

After the tour, gather with the group to talk about what they saw. Discuss the two questions. Invite a time of silent prayer for these places and all the people whose lives are touched by them.

③ What God Can See

Leader preparation: As you talk about how people respond to the words and the underlying messages of the song used in this activity, be sensitive to those men and women who may be struggling with letting go or who are having difficulty seeing hope in the midst of the transitions they are experiencing. It is one thing to blithely sing about the imagery of hope reflected in the metamorphosis that a caterpillar undergoes in becoming a butterfly. It can be quite another thing to feel and hold on to the hope of resurrection as we face our own death or that of a

loved one. The caterpillar's transformation can feel safely distant and theoretical. Mortality in ourselves or those close to us can cause us to experience, particularly at points, a disquiet that makes the words of this or any song feel like trite platitudes. As you guide the discussion, grant appropriate acknowledgement of the full range of human experience—both the suffering that can shadow life and the seeds of hope that can be germinated through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Supplies:

- song: "In the Bulb There Is a Flower;" by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise); video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>; lyrics, http://www.hymnary.org/text/in_a_bulb_there_is_a_flower

As a group, listen to the song "In the Bulb There Is a Flower," which is in the video that can be accessed via the link given above. Or find the song in a hymnal or songbook and read or sing it together. Discuss:

- What thoughts and emotions did you experience as you listened to the words of the song and/or saw the images in the video?
- What do the words of this song say about difficult or challenging transitions that could hold blessings within them?

Form three groups and ask each group to study one of the stanzas, referring to the Internet link given above or to a hymnal or songbook. Encourage the groups to look closely at the stanzas they have been assigned and ponder the following questions:

- What questions, anxiety, or assurance do the words of this stanza generate for you?
- What do the words suggest about what God can see that humans often cannot?

Bring the entire group back together, and ask for reports from the smaller groups. What common threads and thoughts did the groups touch on? Ask:

- What other examples can you think of that illustrate that God's perspective on transition and change can be different from ours?
- What do the words of this song suggest to you about the blessings, joy, and hope that can be experienced in learning to "let go" in the midst of life's transitions?

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Palm Partner Pressure (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: As you make plans to conduct this activity, take into consideration the personalities of your participants and any physical challenges they must deal with. If, for whatever reason, pairing off and exerting even a moderate amount of pressure against the palms of another person is problematic, consider asking the participants to either place their own palms together and push, tense a muscle group (stomach or leg muscles, for example), or simply hold a book at arm's length until you give the signal to stop. The important thing is not the activity itself but that you utilize whatever you do to stimulate thought and discussion about issues around the challenges of letting go.

Supplies: None

Form pairs and ask them to follow your instructions:

- Please stand and face each other.
- Raise your hands approximately chest high with your open palms facing toward your partner.
- Place your open, flat palms against those of your partner.
- Begin gradually to exert pressure against the palms of your partner. Don't try to push your "palm partner" backward or over. Just slowly increase pressure on each other's palms to the point at which you are both feeling a little strain, but not to the degree that your muscles are aching and sweat beads form on your face.

Let the pairs continue to push against each other's palms for about a minute, depending on how much of a physical strain this appears to be on group members. Obviously, if you see or sense that this is overly taxing for anyone, grant immediate permission to cease and desist. At the end of the time, tell participants to stop pushing. Use some of the following questions to stimulate discussion:

- What degree of stress and/or frustration did you feel as you pushed against the palms of your partner and felt the resistance and push back? (There may be participants who felt little or no discomfort or frustration. Others, however, may have experienced some annoyance at feeling obligated to go through the exercise at all. They may have felt pushed beyond their physical and social comfort zones.)
- In what sense do these feelings mirror what you experience in the daily flow of life? (Most of us feel the push and pull of both subtle and clearly articulated expectations. These expectations can come from external sources or they can well up from within. Wherever they originate, we can sometimes find them hard to resist. We may feel annoyed or burdened by their insistent tug or push on us, but we can find it difficult to muster the will to let go of our sense of obligation to comply.)
- To what extent did you feel like giving up, at any point, and ending your participation in the activity? If you felt like stopping at any point, why didn't you? (Giving up and letting go can be among the most difficult things that human beings attempt to do. It sounds so easy—just let go, simply stop. But letting go can feel like failure. Stopping can feel like loss—if nothing else, a loss of approval from those who seem to expect us to hold on or keep going.)
- How did you feel when you were given the word to stop pushing? Did you in any sense want to keep pushing? To what extent did you experience relief?

5 A Matter of Perspective

Leader preparation: Prior to the session, ask five participants to role-play the following characters mentioned in 1 Samuel 16:1–23: Samuel, Saul, Jesse, Eliab, and David. As you tell them of the assignment, encourage them to read the passage prior to your group meeting. Suggest that they also use commentaries, Bible dictionaries, and any pertinent notes in their study Bibles to learn more about the characters they will portray and the circumstances and nuances represented in the 1 Samuel account. Emphasize that each person in the passage is in some mea-

sure sensing, anticipating, and experiencing a phase of transition. A brief summary of a portion of what these characters are experiencing might be expressed in this way:

- *Samuel*: He had anointed Saul as king of Israel and now was faced with the risky task of anointing Saul's successor while Saul was still on the throne.
- *Saul*: He was no longer in God's favor. He could no doubt feel power slipping from his grasp.
- *Jesse*: Samuel wanted to see his sons. Perhaps big things were ahead for one of his offspring, but he was unsure what all this meant.
- *Eliab*: As the eldest son, he might have expected a special blessing from Samuel.
- *David*: He was anointed with oil by God's representative and was called for special duty in the king's court. Life was starting to change quickly and inexorably for this young shepherd.

Supplies:

- Bibles, Bible dictionaries, study Bibles

Gather the group and ask volunteers to read aloud 1 Samuel 16:1–23. Then invite the five volunteer actors to offer brief ad lib, imaginative monologues about the internal feelings and thoughts of their characters as the events of the 1 Samuel passage played out.

Once the role-plays have been presented, point out that how we experience transition is often a matter of what role we find ourselves playing in a specific change scenario. For example, in the course of an election, one political party might experience the jubilation of victory as power changes hands, while the other party experiences rejection and a demoralizing case of the doldrums. In like manner, each person in the 1 Samuel account experienced in a distinct way the unfolding drama of this transition in the life of Israel.

Invite discussion with the following questions:

- How did each character seem to perceive and respond to the transitions he was facing?
- Regarding the changes these persons were anticipating or grappling with, what parallel situations are faced by you or those you know?
- Which of the characters do you find yourself identifying with the most? Why?



6 Moving To and Moving From

Leader preparation: Spend time contemplating “Christina’s World, 1948” prior to meeting with participants. Ponder the same questions that the other group members will wrestle with. Note the thoughts that spring to mind and the feelings that emerge. In particular, ask yourself this question: How do my thoughts and feelings connect to experiences of transition in my own life?

If you would like additional information about Christina Olson, Andrew Wyeth, and the painting, type “Christina’s World” and “Andrew Wyeth” into an Internet search engine. Be sure to read several articles to substantiate any information you utilize. Websites vary widely in terms of their reliability and the care they take in verifying the veracity of their material. You might find this article from

Smithsonian magazine helpful: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/wyeth.html>.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Christina’s World, 1948,” by Andrew Wyeth, <http://www.art.com/products/p10041656-sa-i783641/andrew-wyeth-christinas-world-1948.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=0f6ded272c5f442f8f4b43201f2adbfc&searchstring=christina%27s+world>
- “‘Christina’s World, 1948’ Questions,” Attachment: Activity 6
- pens

Display “Christina’s World, 1948” by Andrew Wyeth. Give a copy of the hand-out and a pen to each participant. Give participants 7–10 minutes to consider the painting, ponder their responses to the questions, and write any notes about their thoughts and feelings.

Gather the group and invite adults to tell about some of their impressions. As the discussion progresses, be alert to any comment that touch upon themes such things as grief, parting, longing, fear, anxiety, hesitancy, uncertainty, and so on. All of these matters have potential connections with experiences of transition. As we wrestle with moving away from what we have known and moving toward what has yet to be, we are apt to feel a whirl of emotions—from elation and anticipation to anguish and apprehension.

Offer the following background information about the painting. Andrew Wyeth finished the painting in 1948. The inspiration for the work was a woman named Christina Olson, who suffered from a degenerative muscular disorder. By the time Wyeth met her, Olson was unable to walk. Rather than use a wheelchair, she preferred to crawl from place to place. Christina Olson was fifty-five years old when the painting was finished, considerably older than the young woman depicted in the work. According to a widely reported story, Wyeth was inspired to begin the painting when he observed Olson edging her way back to her home after visiting the graves of her parents, which were located on adjacent family-owned property. Ask:

- Does this information alter your thoughts and feelings about this painting? How so?
- How might this painting speak to us about transitions, the ever-shifting nature of life, and how people respond to change?

Sending & Serving Activities



7 A Blessing Here, A Blessing There (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Many blessings are everyday gifts that we seldom pause to appreciate. That they are commonplace and seemingly ordinary, however, does not make them any less miraculous and meaningful. As you enter into this activity, take time to recognize anew the blessings that dot your path—and the paths of the other group members. Take time to contemplate these blessings and be grateful.

Supplies: None

Give participants the following instructions: I would like you to spend a few quiet moments examining the contents of your wallet or purse, with the aim of identifying something that represents a blessing in your life. Or you might find that something you are wearing represents a blessing for you.

Give group members a few minutes to identify a symbol of blessing for them. Then invite them to “show and tell” what they have identified and the blessing it represents. For example, someone might share a picture of a family member, friend, or mentor who is a special blessing to him or her. Someone else might point to a restaurant discount coupon (representing food), eyeglasses (the blessing of corrected vision), or a library card (the blessing of the well-written word).

8 Unanticipated Blessings

Leader preparation: During this activity you will explore blessings that can develop from unexpected, even unfavorable, circumstances. This is not to say that God sends challenging or disturbing things to teach us spiritual life lessons—although in some cases that may be a distinct possibility. It is rather to say that the Spirit of God has a way of creatively entering into vexing, uncomfortable, and painful circumstances in order to bring some measure of blessing out of them. Wisdom can emerge from woe; comfort and hope can begin to form where only grief and discouragement were previously present. How this happens cannot be adequately explained. What period of time must pass or what twists and turns on the journey we must take till blessing emerges from life’s seismic shifts and bruising collisions cannot be predicted. All that many of us can testify to is that, in some mysterious way, the grace of God often spins a ray of hope out of dross and despair.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- candles and matches or electric votives

Light a few candles and darken the room. Ask participants to seat themselves in a circle. Ask two volunteers to read aloud Ephesians 3:14–20, alternating verses. Then hold one of the candles and say: *In this passage Paul seems to identify as blessings two things that might have surprised some of those who came to the Christian faith from the Hebrew tradition. What blessings do you see Paul indentifying in these verses?*

If it does not come out in the course of discussion, point out two areas of blessing. Paul refers to the benefits of his imprisonment in furthering the spread of the gospel. He also touches on the shift his thinking had undergone as he perceived that Gentiles, as well as Jews, were heirs to God’s kingdom through Jesus Christ. This latter possibility would have been shocking for many Jews of that time. In other words, Paul was able to sense the possibility of blessing in two areas where some people would have had difficulty seeing such a possibility.

Go on to explain that you are going to pass the candle to the person on your left. Ask that participant to identify a blessing in his or her life that at one point he or she did not think of as a blessing. (For example, people who are annoying; situations I find frustrating; illness that taught me a sense of my vulnerability; people whose views on politics and religion differ from my own; the discovery that I was woefully wrong about something I was dead certain I was right about; losing out on a promotion I had hoped for.)

Start by articulating a blessing you discovered among what some might see—and you at one time might have seen—as rubble. Then pass the candle to the person on your left—and so on around the circle. In the process of this activity,

give participants the freedom to decline to say anything or to briefly elaborate on how they have come to see blessing in places where there originally seemed to be no blessing.

9 A Transition Panel

Leader preparation: Invite three guests to form a panel to discuss the challenges of letting go and the potential blessings that can emerge from such an experience. For example, you might invite someone who moved from a distant community to attend school or take a new job, an individual who has let go of a relationship that was unhealthy, or a person who left behind a theological, biblical, or faith issue understanding that he or she had clung to for many years. The specific details are less important than that you look for panel participants who experienced a significant transition in their lives, dealt honestly with the emotional and intellectual challenges of their experience, and have come to a place of gratitude for the journey they have traveled.

This is not to say that the panel participants should see their experiences through a rose-colored rearview mirror. In fact, the discussion and interaction with the rest of the group members may benefit from participants who are willing to candidly discuss the complexities, challenges, struggles, pain, confusion, ambivalence, grief, joy, regrets, and emerging sense of blessing that might have been—and may continue to be—a part of the mix.

Be sure to make contacts well in advance of your session in order to give panel participants plenty of time to prepare. In your conversation with these persons prior to the session, ask each panel member to prepare to tell his or her story in five minutes or less.

Reflect

What transitions have you encountered and how have they shaped you and your view of life? Just because change and transition are ever with us does not mean that they ever become easy to deal with. Though we can learn to better cope with the alterations and adjustments life forces on us—and the disorientation and dislocation that we sometimes unwittingly initiate—there is a sense in which we never stop being learners in the school of shifting circumstances. Be patient with yourself and the other participants. Life is not for the faint of heart. Weathering the inevitable storms of our sojourn on earth takes persistence and grace—the willingness to forgive and to be forgiven.

Supplies: None

Introduce the panel members, and invite each one to tell his or her story of letting go. After all three have told their stories, open things up for group discussion. As is helpful, you might want to pose the following questions in the course of the discussion:

- In what ways do your own experiences compare and contrast with those shared by our panel members?
- What do you sense are some of the primary challenges of transition and letting go experiences?
- What are some of the lingering feelings, memories, and impressions that you associate with your own experiences of transition and letting go?
- What are some of the blessings that can come from transitions and letting go?
- In what ways do these types of experiences help prepare us to be the body of Christ within our relationships and communities?



Attachment: Activity 6

“Christina’s World, 1948” Questions

What emotions do you imagine that the young woman in the painting is experiencing?

What attitudes and feelings are suggested to you by the positioning of her arms, legs, head, and torso?

What expressions do you suppose are being registered on her face?

Do you think this young woman is moving toward something or someone, moving away from something or someone, or remaining relatively quiet and still? Why do you have that impression?

What emotions might she be experiencing?

Who or what might the house represent?

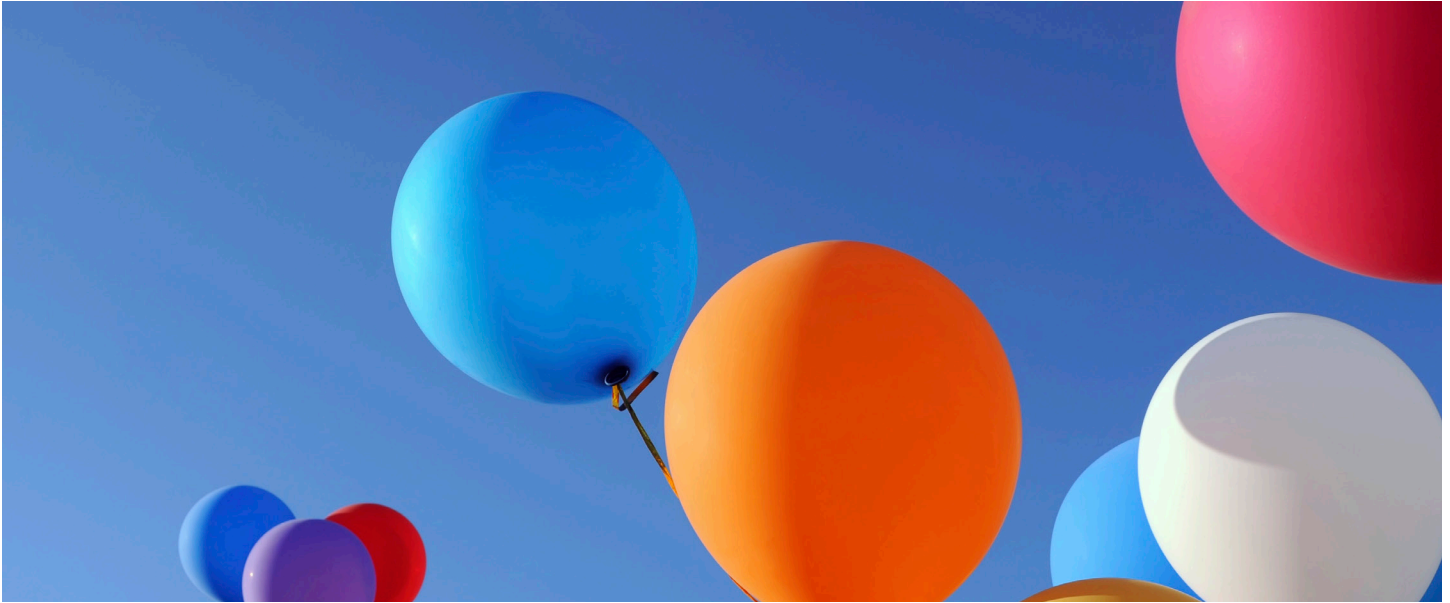
Do you feel she is being drawn toward the house or repelled by it?

What action might have preceded the scene depicted in the painting?

What action do you imagine might follow the scene depicted in the painting?

What thoughts and emotions are evoked for you as you look at the painting?

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Scripture

About this Age Group

Adults come to the Bible from a variety of backgrounds. Some have heard the stories and memorized selected verses since they were children in Sunday school. Some have read little of the Good Book and know more about it from reputation than from personal encounter. Should they engage the biblical material with open minds, eyes, and hearts, however, most adults have had sufficient life experience to begin to see the connecting points between their own life experiences and what the men and women of the Bible encountered. At whatever stage of life they find themselves, adults can come to feel anew the weight, heft, and incontestable significance of stories of individuals and communities who attempted to weather sea changes, storms, triumphs, defeats, uncertainties, losses, comings, and goings as they sought to journey with God and to open themselves as fully as possible to God's blessings.

About this Exploration

The practice of blessing and letting go is integral to human existence, for to be alive is to experience change. The biblical narrative is, in large measure, the story of God's people and their history of leaving behind and journeying toward. Just as the Hebrew people are about to enter a new land, they must say goodbye to Moses and embrace a new leader. The end of one chapter often means the start of something new and completely different. We negotiate these times of transition by grieving the losses, letting go, and moving onto new adventures. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called his disciples to let go of old understandings and embrace a way of life based on love and grace. As we grapple with the scriptures, we recognize that to live is to let go, to live fully is to bless and be blessed.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Deuteronomy 34:1-1
Matthew 5:43-48

Leader Preparation

Many adults have heard the narrative stories and the somber-sounding words of the Bible for so long that they are in danger of treating them like sacred, overly familiar background music. They can benefit from being reminded that the scriptures are not just yesterday's news and a story we know by rote—they are the Word of God. Because of this, the words of scripture are alive, organic, dynamic; they can be as quicksilver as a kaleidoscope. Each time we seriously engage with them, they have the capacity to speak to us in fresh, unexpected ways that can potentially rearrange our worldview, speaking words of comfort where we feel a sense of disquiet, and insistently poking and prodding us at the points where we have become too comfortable.

Prayer: God, as we journey, leave, enter, change, and seek the best of what you have to offer, open us to your living Word, so that we might experience it in the marrow of our bones and in the depths of our souls. Amen.

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Statement Stampede (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Hope that the statements you read during this activity will not start a real stampede, resulting in bruised and trampled participants. What you will aim for here is the movement of group members as they grapple with the possibility that one of the things that undergoes change over time is how people and faith communities understand the biblical narrative and their faith practices. Whether participants find themselves blessing or cursing, such shifts will to some extent depend on whether they perceive the Bible and their faith as a static set of precepts to be handed down from one generation to the next, or as a living, dynamic story that is still in the process of unfolding—a narrative they are not only receiving, but also in which they are part.

Depending on the layout of your room, the number of participants, and any mobility challenges, you may want to suggest that participants use simple gestures such as thumps up/thumps down or applause responses to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement.

Supplies:

- Bible

Explain that you will read a series of six statements:

As I read each statement, please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the assertion. Visualize the width of our room as a continuum. If you completely agree with the statement, move to the right side of the room as far as you can. If you completely disagree, move as far as possible to the left side of the room. Depending on your level of agreement or disagreement, position yourself along the continuum at the appropriate point.

Read the following statements, allowing time for group members to position themselves along the continuum in response. (Included with the statements are parenthetical points that may be useful in the discussion that follows.)

- *God's creation is stable and changeless, and hums along like a precision clock.* (Species of plants and animals have appeared and disappeared. Ice ages have come and gone. Volcanic activity has ebbed and flowed. To some degree, change seems to be one of the most strikingly consistent characteristics of God's creation.)
- *There are no differences in how God is characterized in the Old Testament and in the New Testament.* (God may be unchanging, but how God's people understand and experience their Creator is alive, vital, and unfolding.)
- *Moses and the apostle Paul would totally agree on what is required to faithfully follow God.* (It seems clear that Paul did not always agree even with Christian leaders who were his contemporaries. See, for example, Galatians 2:11–16.)
- *The Christianity practiced in our culture is identical to the Christianity practiced in the early church immediately following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.* (There are persistent threads of thought and practice that can be traced through the centuries to our own time. Occurrences such as the Protestant Reformation and contemporary debates swirling around worship practices and postmodern thought indicate, however, that there has

at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities using at least one activity from each category.

been and continues to be shift and change in how Christianity is understood and practiced.)

- *Our understanding of the practice of the Christian faith is flawless and should never be altered in any way.* (Though there have been people and groups who have claimed that any deviation from their conception of the Christian faith is a heretical perversion, the practices and nuances of how we understand our Christian faith and practice have never been static.)
- *If a Christian of the first century and a believer of the twenty-first century were to sit together for Bible study, they would find no points of disagreement.* (Since a full canon of the books of the New Testament was incomplete at the end of the first century, and variations of the books included continue to this day depending on which Christian faith tradition one is referring to, complete agreement seems highly unlikely.)

After reading the six assertions, invite the participants to articulate some of their thoughts and feelings as they responded to the statements. Then pose the following questions:

- How comfortable are you with the possibility that one’s understanding of faith and of the Bible might shift over time?
- To what extent might such a shift be positive? To what extent might such a shift be problematic?

2 Common Transitions

Leader preparation: In this activity participants look in news sources for stories that deal with experiences of transition and letting go. Some common experiences that group members identify from these sources might include stories about death, injury, divorce, losing sports teams, the closing of a plant or business, a retirement, an individual assuming an appointed office or resigning in disgrace, and so forth. One thing participants are apt to discover is that many of the accounts in the Bible reflect experiences of transition and letting go that do not differ markedly from what people experience in the twenty-first century. To be sure, few of us spend seventy years in exile in Babylon, but most of us encounter a feeling of being out of place and emotionally exiled at one time or another. We may not get sold into slavery by our siblings, as Joseph did, but many of us have been blindsided and betrayed by those we trusted. We, too, are forced to decide how we will respond to the challenges of trust and forgiveness in the future.

Supplies:

- newspapers to cut apart
- news magazines to cut apart
- poster board or newsprint
- glue sticks
- scissors
- (optional) computer with Internet access

Form small groups of three or four persons. Give each group a sheet of poster board or newsprint, scissors, a glue stick, and a quantity of newspapers and news magazines. Instruct them to look through the newspapers for pictures and stories that deal in some way with transitions and letting go. Tell them to cut out these articles, ads, or pictures and glue them on the poster board or newsprint along with a descriptive heading and any descriptive terms or phrases they think appropriate.

Once the groups have completed their posters, invite each small group to show the entire gathering the articles and pictures they have found and how they have characterized them. After the groups' reports, stimulate further discussion by asking the following.

- In what ways do the experiences of transition and of letting go that you featured on your poster compare or contrast with the common experiences of most human beings?
- In what ways do your own experiences compare or contrast with the news stories you found?
- What examples of similar or contrasting types of transitions and experiences of letting go can you recall from the biblical narrative?
- Regarding experiences of transition and letting go, to what extent would you say that the Bible contains accounts with which most contemporary individuals could identify? Explain the reasons for your answer.

③ Losses and Gains

Leader preparation: Although we sometimes like to divide life into positives and negatives—pluses and minuses—rarely do things split into categories that are that neat and tidy. Especially in the Christian view, each sorrow is scented with hope; each stride forward has its cost. The cross and the empty tomb are good examples of this mysterious, miraculous mixture. Out of the shame, pain, and sorrow of the cross came the triumph of the empty tomb. Yet, in celebrating the resurrected Christ and what that means for our own lives, we are reminded of the enormous cost of that triumph.

In this context, the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat are not so much opposite ends of a continuum as they are recurring components that are both present in most of the changes and transitions we encounter in life. Loss and gain almost always coexist and are seldom absent from the vast majority of life's pivotal experiences. Bear that in mind as you lead this activity.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Draw a line down the center of the whiteboard or newsprint. On one half, write the heading "Letting Go / What Was Lost." On the other half, write the heading "Embracing and Blessing / What Was Gained."

Form pairs and ask partners to read aloud Deuteronomy 34:1–12 to each other, alternating verses. Instruct pairs to identify the two most significant changes that, according to this passage, were occurring at this time in the life of the people of God known as Israel. Ask pairs to report their responses to the entire group. As a group, work at forming a consensus on these two changes. As is helpful, mention the following changes: Moses, whom God called to bring the people out of Egypt, died; Joshua, Moses' former lieutenant and the person God called to lead the people into the promised land, was embraced as the new leader of the Israelites.

Invite participants to propose some of the things that this passage might suggest for inclusion under the two headings on the whiteboard or newsprint. For example, Moses' death meant that the Israelites lost a familiar, trusted leader. In the midst of letting go, however, Israel also learned something about its growth, resilience, and strength as the people of God. They had grown enough to be able

to welcome and bless Joshua as their new leader. Rather than fracturing into rival factions and coming apart at the seams, they came together under Joshua and moved toward crossing the Jordan and beginning to take possession of the promised land.

As group members suggest possibilities under each heading, be alert for opportunities to follow up with these questions:

- What might this passage say to us about the melding of letting go and embracing, grieving and rejoicing, and loss and gain—elements of many transition experiences?
- What transitions in your own life have presented you with both deep losses and undeniable gains?
- What does the gospel of Jesus Christ have to say to us about death and resurrection, loss and gain?

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 People on the Move (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: One persistent desire that human beings seem to have is the longing to freeze-frame life during a celebrative, high point or when things are relatively calm and going well. Of course, experience teaches that no feeling or period lasts forever—be it good or not so good. A misconception concerning Christianity is that faithful discipleship and practice ought to—if done right—bring us to the point where we enter into a spiritual cruise-control zone in which life’s twists, turns, and traumas are eliminated, and we are able to follow an unaltered course on untroubled seas until Jesus returns. As is repeatedly evident in the Bible, however, those who follow God continue to bump up against staggering transitions and jolting changes that test their faith and resolve. Paul likely had more floggings, shipwrecks, and jail time after becoming a follower of Christ than he did when he was persecuting the church. The difference in people of faith is not so much what they face, as compared to those who make no faith claims, but in how they face it. As Christians move forward in faith, they can become practiced in—with God’s help—letting go, gracefully persevering through change, and moving to what lies ahead.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Give participants the following instructions:

As we read the biblical narrative, among the things we notice are the number of times that individual persons or groups are asked to let go of something in their lives in order to take a step forward in their pilgrimage as God’s people. Transitions, even positive transitions, often call on God’s people to move away from something even as they move toward what comes next. I am going to give you three or four minutes to individually think of biblical characters who were asked to let go of something, even as they were being invited to embrace what God seemed to be calling them to. If you would like, you can thumb through a Bible as you settle on one character or group. If you have difficulty coming up with a biblical character, you may wish to choose one of the individuals I write on the board.

Write the name and the Bible references of the following individuals on the whiteboard or newsprint:

- Abraham: Genesis 12:1–8
- Esther: Esther 2:1–18
- Paul: Acts 9:1–22

Tell participants that once they have identified a biblical character, they are to plan how they might represent that person with one or two gestures or by using no more than seven words. Allow a moment for thought, and then ask for volunteers to demonstrate their gestures or speak their chosen words and see if the group can guess the identities of the biblical characters. For each biblical character named, invite the group to consider what these individuals were letting go of and what were they moving toward in their journeys as God’s people. Ask: *In what ways do you see the experiences of this biblical character as being similar to the letting go and moving toward that God’s people experience today?*

5 Give It Up?

Leader preparation: This activity focuses on Mark 10:17–31, Jesus’ encounter with a man of means. Many in the church have viewed this wealthy man as spiritually shallow. And, indeed, it would appear that he was not all that Jesus was calling him to be. We do this man a disservice, however, when we embrace the temptation to feel superior to him. We might like to think that, should Jesus ask us, we would be willing to put our house on the market, organize a huge garage sale, and prepare to start distributing money to the under-clothed, under-housed, and underfed among us. In reality, we often lose sight of just how earth shaking and radical Jesus’ words were. Perhaps we would be willing to let go of our financial assets in a heartbeat or perhaps—somewhat like the gentleman in this passage—our fingers would have to be pried away. The point is that faithful Christian practice may, at some point, call us to let go of something that is just as difficult for us as it was for the rich man who came to Jesus.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Mark 10:17–31. If possible also read it aloud from a modern language edition, such as *The Message* or the *New Living Translation*. Invite participants to list the key points of this story. As is helpful, include the following points:

- The rich man was being asked to let go of his wealth.
- The rich man was being invited to embrace a new way of thinking about material wealth, how he might bless those in need, and what it means to reflect the deep, loving character of God.
- In seeing Jesus’ response to the rich man, the disciples were forced to examine, once again, what they were letting go of and what they might be gaining in following him.
- One can almost detect the disciples’ nagging doubt about all they had left behind in Peter’s exclamation, “We have left everything to follow you!”

Form two groups. (If your group is large, you might form four groups and have two debates.) Ask one team to plan a defense of the following proposition: What the disciples gave up and what the rich man was being asked to let go of were unrealistic and far more than they were likely to receive in return. Ask the other team to plan a defense of this proposition: What the disciples gave up and what the rich man was being asked to let go of were not as valuable as what Jesus was calling them to experience and receive.

Give the two sides some time to formulate their points, and then let the debate begin. Once you have called a halt to the “debate,” invite all the participants to reflect on points that were raised during the dialog. Pose the following questions:

- When is letting go worth the sense of loss, grief, and deprivation one experiences?
- Are there times when letting go is too high a price to pay? If so, when?
- To what extent are supposed gains and blessings positive when they make it necessary for us to move beyond our comfort zones, to renounce our long-held values, and to adjust our ways of accessing our own wealth or success?
- To what extent, if any, are the blessings of following Christ of greater value than what disciples are asked to let go of?
- What might we be called on to let go of, in the twenty-first century, in order to be faithful followers of Christ?

⑥ Blessing the Undeserving

Leader preparation: During this activity you will lead the participants in wrestling with this question: In what sense can we, or should we, bless those who seem unworthy of blessing? It is a question that is suggested by Jesus’ words as recorded in Matthew 5:43–48. In this passage Jesus instructs his listeners to love not only those who are worthy of love, but to also love and bless those who seem no more deserving of such fond consideration than an office slacker is deserving of an incentive bonus.

Prepare index cards prior to the session. On each card, describe an individual that many people in your community might have reason to feel less than positive about—persons whom community members might be inclined, on first impulse, to curse rather than bless. Prepare at least ten cards. Suggestions:

- a rude, misbehaving child
- an uncooperative, spiteful coworker
- a prostitute or pimp
- an incompetent store clerk
- a friend who lied to you
- a drug dealer
- a person who spread an unflattering, untrue rumor about you
- a Taliban insurgent
- a person who refuses to pay the money owed to you
- a person who cuts in front of you in a ticket line
- a Wall Street swindler
- a sexual predator
- an arsonist
- a patron who talks throughout a movie

Supplies:

- Bibles
- index cards
- pen
- basket or bag

Place the prepared index cards in a basket or bag. Be sure that participants cannot see what is written on the cards. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Matthew 5:43–48.

Invite one or two volunteers to sum up, in a sentence or two, Jesus' main point. Then ask: *How can Christians today put Jesus' words into everyday practice?*

Tell members that the index cards in the basket have brief descriptions of individuals that many people might be inclined to see as enemies or adversaries—or as simply annoying. Together, you will wonder how you might apply Jesus' words of love and blessing to such individuals. Ask a volunteer to draw a card from the basket and read the description. As a group, wrestle with responses to these questions for each card drawn:

- In what sense might this person be the type Jesus was referring to in the Matthew passage?
- What would it look like to love and bless this person?

As time allows, try to discuss six or seven of the index cards. The responses may not come easily, particularly regarding some of the types named on the cards. It might be relatively simple to exhibit patience with a bumbling store clerk or shrug our shoulders when someone cuts in front of us in line. Turning the other cheek in these situations, as a form of blessing others, seems doable for most. But determining how we bless our enemies and those who seem to neither desire nor deserve our blessing is a much more difficult question. Regarding those who offend our deepest sensibilities, how do we bless, in some measure, without excusing their behavior? How we respond as we struggle with that kind of question may begin to get at the heart of what Jesus seemed to be touching on as he talked about loving our enemies and the benefits of God's creation that even the so-called vile and despicable enjoy.

Sending & Serving Activities

7 A Different Perspective (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Jesus challenged those around him to see familiar things in new ways. Rather than having them physically stand on their heads or climb into a hot air balloon to see what the world around them looked like from those perspectives, Jesus took beliefs they thought they understood and attitudes they rarely bothered to question and urged them to turn those beliefs and attitudes inside-out to more closely examine them. Wrestling with transition, letting go, and even blessing can test our reserves of energy, graciousness, and sanity. One thing that can sometimes help is the ability to see the common things around us with different eyes. This activity is designed to give participants a bit of practice in doing that. As you lead this activity, be aware and considerate of anyone who might have mobility limitations. Encourage individuals to participate only to the extent they feel comfortable. Even sitting in a chair and shielding their eyes will help group members sense the essence of what this activity attempts to explore.

Supplies: None

Invite participants to stand and bend forward as far as it is comfortable for them, but keeping the upper body parallel with the floor. Then ask them to place their hands above their eyes roughly at eyebrow level, in essence creating a kind of visor and blinders that blocks their view ahead of them and their peripheral vision.

Instruct the group members to slowly walk around the room, being careful not to move so quickly that they will injure themselves or others should they bump

into furniture, walls, or other persons. After a minute, ask participants to return to their seats, and ask the following questions:

- What was it like to walk around in this way?
- What did you see that you don't generally notice?
- What were you unable to see that you usually can see?

Point out that two recurring phrases from the mouth of Jesus appear in the fifth chapter of Matthew. The first phrase is "You have heard that it was said." The second phrase is "But I tell you." Jesus used those words to challenge his listeners to think differently. Specifically, Jesus challenged those around him to look at hatred, adultery, oath taking, retribution, and one's enemies from a different perspective.

- In what ways might looking at things from a different perspective give us new insights into matters dealing with change, transition, letting go, and blessing?
- What challenges in your own life—regarding change, transition, letting go, and blessing—might benefit from gaining a different perspective on them?

8 The Feel of Baptism

Leader preparation: As you prepare to lead this activity, you may find it beneficial to mull over the following thoughts. In the Christian practice of baptism, we symbolize the beginning of the letting go of our status and self-perception as people who exist in the world as independent entities and the beginning of the transition to ever more fully embracing unity with God, God's Spirit, God's creation, God's creatures, and the people of God known as the church. It marks the beginning of a journey, at whatever age we participate in it.

Baptism was a leaving behind and the beginning of a transitional journey for Jesus. Jesus was letting go of the stage of his life in which he had operated outside the view of public notice. Shortly after his baptism he would begin his public ministry and his proclamation of the kingdom of God. As happens for us in the act of baptism, Jesus was marking the widening of his circle of connection with humankind; he was symbolizing his unity with the Spirit of the God who reaches out to embrace all of creation in the wonder of rebirth and renewal. This rebirth includes the key elements of letting go of what has been, transitioning to what can be, and becoming the kind of new person in Christ who seeks to bless with grace and generosity of spirit all that is.

Be sensitive to those who have yet to be baptized. You may wish to be prepared to respond to questions that might come up about your church's baptism policies and practices or to refer such questions to a minister or church leader who could help answer them.

Supplies:

- Bible
- a large container of water
- one small bowl for each participant
- artwork: "The Baptism of Jesus," by Pheoris West, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1725021198?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37961&store_id=1401

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Mark 1:9–11, an account of the baptism of Jesus.

Distribute a small bowl to each participant. Invite group members to use their bowl to dip out a small amount of water from the larger container and return to their seats.

Direct the attention of participants to “The Baptism of Jesus” by Pheoris West. Use your own words to communicate the following:

Spend some time in silence as you contemplate what you see and experience through this painting depicting Jesus’ baptism. As you do so, you may want to dip your hand in the bowl of water to remind yourself of the tactile feel and physical presence of water in the practice of baptism. You may even wish to place your wet fingers on your face or dribble a few drops of water on your head. In other words, don’t just look at the image; attempt to enter into the feel and experience of the painting. As you do this, ponder these two questions: What am I sensing about the baptism of Jesus in this painting? What am I sensing about my own baptism—either the baptism I have undergone or the act of baptism I might undergo in the future?

After a few moments, break the silence by indicating that you are going to articulate a few questions, pausing after each question in order to give the participants a brief time to ponder them silently:

- What does baptism feel like? What are the physical sensations you associate with it?
- What does baptism feel like? What transitions did it set in motion in your life, and what are the ripple effects of your baptism in your life today?
- What does baptism feel like? How does it feel in terms of how we live our daily lives in a world of loss, grief, joy, sorrow, death, rebirth, letting go, embracing and blessing? What difference does it make to be baptized in Christ and into his body, the church?

After these questions, invite group members to report some of the thoughts, feelings, and impressions generated by this experience responding with free association to the card they draw. The game was developed to respond to the variety of people’s mental skills. Random drawing and not using teams will probably result in participants having to use their anti-skills, their least developed and most humble gifts. At the end, choose one of the possibilities and take it further in the church or community.

Blessing Envy

Leader preparation: For most of us, one disappointment in our lives is not that we fail to receive any blessings, but that we do not always receive the blessings we anticipate or want. One thing disciple must learn is to grow in Christ so that the gratitude for what we have becomes greater than our disgruntlement over what we do not have. That is not to say that our disgruntlement should be denied or that it makes us a bad person. Disappointment is a natural part of life. Even for the believer, what it is never quite measures up to what we’d hoped for. That is where time and the grace of God can, over time, help us to deal with the dissatisfaction and grief and learn to more consistently embrace a fuller measure of contentment and joy. As you prepare to lead this activity, read the suggested passages and use additional resources to consider the shifting relationship that Jacob and Esau experienced. Consider your own list of disappointments and how well you have made peace with the ways in which your life has been blessed.

Supplies:

- Bibles

To set the stage for this activity, ask volunteers to read aloud Genesis 27:30–41 and Genesis 33:4, 8–9. In your own words, briefly offer the following points:

- Jacob conspired with his mother to receive his father’s blessing, which normally would have been given to Esau as the eldest son.
- In order to receive the blessing from his father, whose eyesight was impaired, Jacob disguised himself as Esau.
- In the thought of the times, once blessings were given they could be neither rescinded nor redirected to another individual.
- Esau was enraged and begged for a blessing of his own. Even though he received a blessing from his father, Esau determined to seek revenge by killing Jacob. Jacob fled for his life.
- After many years had passed, Jacob and Esau were reunited. By then, each had experienced a fair degree of prosperity.
- Whatever the degree of Esau’s bitterness had been toward Jacob at one time, he forgave his brother and embraced him.

Discuss the following questions:

- To what extent have you ever felt that your blessings were not quite as desirable as the blessings of others?
- To what extent have you at times resented or envied blessings that others have received?
- To what degree, if any, does “blessing envy” undercut the gratitude we express for and the joy we take in the blessings we receive?
- As growing, journeying followers of Jesus Christ, how might we come to a new, deeper appreciation for the blessings we experience—regardless of the blessings that others receive and we do not?

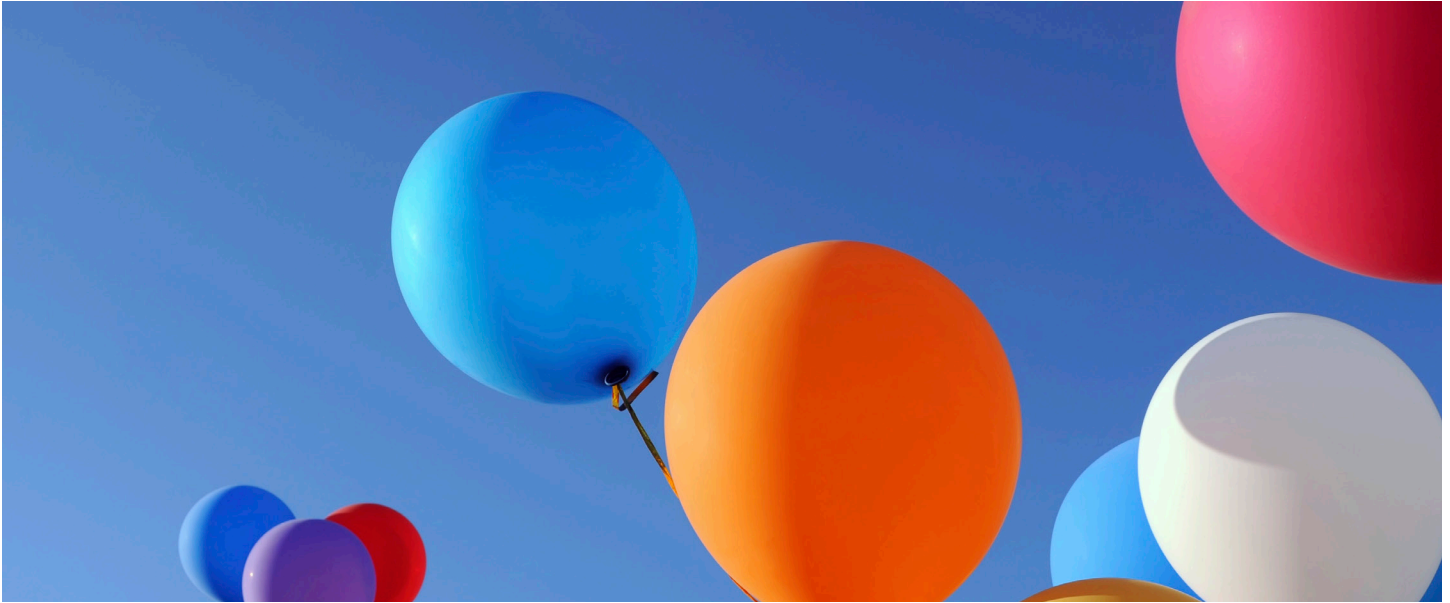
After this discussion, form pairs, and give pairs these instructions.

Reflect

Although the world around us changes with dizzying speed, the basic challenges that human beings face and the raw emotions that we experience have been around for generation upon generation. In what ways did adults sense this as they delved into the biblical material in these activities? How did you see yourself reflected in the biblical characters you encountered? How did your engagement with these age-old stories and sacred words provide you with another perspective from which to view the blessing and letting go that is a part of your own life?

Consider for a moment a blessing you would like your partner to voice for you. It might be that you would like your partner to offer a prayer of blessing that you might sense God’s presence in your life, that you might let go of a resentment, that you might face with faith and courage a challenge you are currently struggling with. Given what we have talked about, perhaps some of you would even like to receive the blessing of increased gratitude for the blessings you have already received. Once you have identified the blessing, communicate it to your partner. Your partner will then offer a prayer for you. Then reverse the roles so that your partner can articulate a desired blessing and have you offer a prayer.

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Age Group

One pitfall that adult followers of Jesus Christ face is the temptation to approach Christian discipleship as a destination rather than as a life-long journey. There is seemingly great security in embracing a number of spiritual, religious truths and cobbling them together to construct a personal fortress within which we can spend our lives, occasionally defending against those who attack our sureties.

The biblical narrative, however, describes faith as something more akin to a kinetic movement than a static, walled mini-enclave. Holding on too tightly has a tendency to strangle spiritual vitality and growth; it is apt to throttle new insights and the creative capacities of the Holy Spirit in our lives. As adult Christian disciples muster the courage and will to let go and embrace the changes and transitions that will inevitably face them, however, they often encounter the surprise of blessing where they feared they would find only strain, disruption, and unceasing pain.

About this Exploration

As followers of Christ, we are on a journey of discovery. In both blessing and letting go, we look to Jesus as our example and trust God for guidance. Jesus shows us how to love and forgive, just as we are forgiven. As Jesus' disciples we are called to let go of our own understandings and open ourselves to new paths filled with compassion, kindness, and thankfulness. God's Spirit dwells with us on this difficult and rewarding adventure, as individuals and as the body of Christ. We are encouraged to discard our own agendas and allow the peace of Christ to inform our thoughts, so we can live in harmony. Christ's message fills our lives so we might bless others through loving, grace-filled words and actions.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Proverbs 3:5–9
Colossians 3:12–17

Leader Preparation

As you prepare for this Exploration, examine what you know of how a life of Christian discipleship is characterized in both church and nonchurch cultures. The Christian life is sometimes characterized as an existence in which followers focus on “just Jesus and me” and seek to experience a life that is forgiven, settled, comfortable, and unchanging. Although one has to admit that there is much about this idyllic picture that seems inviting, there is also little about it that seems much like what we know of the life of Jesus Christ. If we are to be disciples of Christ—followers and imitators of our Lord—how can we expect to live a life so drastically different from his?

The life of Jesus Christ demonstrates, as do most lives of faith, that blessing does not come in the midst of repose, relaxation, and static states of bliss that extend to the horizon and beyond. Blessing comes as we grow in the ability to love, forgive, roll with the punches, and ride the emotional roller coasters of human experience with the dignity and grace drawn from the well of living water that is life in Christ.

Prayer: God, make me willing to discover even the worst about myself, so that I might experience the best that is available through your transforming Spirit of forgiveness. As I grow in imitating you, may I be a blessing, your blessing, to those whose lives I touch. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 The Model Disciple (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: During this activity, participants will be asked to consider the characteristics of those who follow Jesus Christ. In particular, you and the other group members will be encouraged to consider those aspects of Christian discipleship that represent moving away from a life that was toward the life that is and will be in Christ. Spend time prior to the session thinking of what the ideal disciple looks like to you. Ask yourself: In what ways do the leaving behind and the moving toward of Christian discipleship help make the follower of Jesus Christ a person of blessing?

Supplies:

- sticky notes
- pens

Ask for a volunteer, and place that person in the center of the room. Give the rest of the participants sticky notes and pens. Provide the following instructions:

Let’s imagine that the volunteer standing before us is an exemplar, an ideal model, of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Use the sticky notes to write a word, a phrase, or a brief sentence that encapsulates a quality, characteristic, or attitude you think such a model disciple has. Use only one sticky note per attribute. Then stick the note somewhere on our model disciple.

After a few minutes, call a halt to the writing and give participants time to look at the array of attributes that have been affixed to the volunteer. In the ensuing discussion, note words and themes that recur. Then pose the following questions.

- What postings do you find yourself heartily agreeing with? Why?
- What postings do you find yourself disagreeing with or questioning? Why?
- What postings particularly speak to you of transition—of leaving an old self behind and moving toward a new self?
- What postings speak to you of the Christ-focused life as a life of blessing?

2 The Shape of Discipleship

Leader preparation: This activity may give participants the chance to give artistic shape, as well as words, to their understanding of ways they are called as Christian disciples to bless God’s creation and the other human beings who inhabit the planet earth. If group members have difficulty grasping their assignment, the following are some examples of shapes that could be fashioned with the pipe cleaners and what those shapes could symbolize.

- An open circle, symbolizing openness and tolerance toward those who are not Christian
- A cup, symbolizing a cup of water given to those who thirst
- A tree or a fish, symbolizing conservation and/or sensitivity to endangered species
- A clock face, symbolizing the blessing of unhurried, quality time spent with other Christ followers

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities using at least one activity from each category.

Supplies:

- pipe cleaners

Form small groups of three or four participants. Try to have at least three groups. Give each group at least twelve pipe cleaners in a variety of colors. Provide the following instructions:

As disciples of Jesus Christ, one thing to which we are called is the mission of being a blessing to all that is a part of God’s creation: the earth, the earth’s creatures, the resources of the earth, our human brothers and sisters, and so on. Each group is to use its supply of pipe cleaners to come up with a creation that represents in some way the shape of the blessing its members believe God is calling them to be in connection with in one of three categories: (1) the earth’s creatures and resources, (2) other Christian believers, and (3) those who do not identify themselves as Christians.

Assign each group one of the three categories and tell them they will have five minutes to complete their creation. When the small groups have finished, invite each one to “show and tell” their artistic representations of the blessings they believe Christian disciples are called to be. As they do so, ask them to explain what they have created and why. Also encourage them to be candid about how well they feel they are responding to the call to be a blessing as one of Christ’s followers and about ways they can become more faithful and effective in responding to God’s call.

③ A Time-Lapse Timeline

Leader preparation: Plan a way to view the video suggested in Supplies below; it is a highly condensed, time-lapse look at a sea journey between the Norwegian cities of Bergen and Kirkenes. The video lasts approximately 5 minutes. The actual voyage covered just over 1600 miles and took a bit more than five and a half days. This video version of that voyage has some similarities with the ways in which we are able to look back on our pilgrimage of Christian discipleship. Our spiritual journey occurs over many years and contains innumerable stops, starts, maneuvers, turns, course changes, and scenery shifts. But we are incapable of looking back over it in minute detail. We tend to recall only key points—and we do not always remember them with utmost accuracy.

As the participants watch the video and create timelines of some key transition points in their own journeys of discipleship, encourage them to examine and come to a new appreciation of the ways these transitions have contributed to being remade in the image of Christ as they move toward becoming people whose lives bless others.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet connection
- video: “Hurtigruten in Five Minutes,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yra8xYOcY3E&feature=youtube_gdata_player
- 11” x 17” sheets of paper
- markers or colored pencils

Tell the group that a sea journey between the Norwegian cities of Bergen and Kirkenes covers just over 1600 miles and takes five and a half days. View the video, “Hurtigruten in Five Minutes” with participants. Once you and the other group members have watched the video, offer the opportunity for participants to make observations about this truncated version of the actual voyage. Ask: *How is our voyage through life something like this video?*

Distribute 11" x 17" sheets of paper and markers or colored pencils. Encourage group members to spend a few minutes creating a "time-lapse" overview of at least three and no more than six significant transition points in their journey of discipleship. Ask them to use brief phrases to describe these transition points or simple drawings to symbolize them. Suggest that they do this in the form of a timeline and place the transition points in chronological order. For example, someone might highlight the point at which he or she realized that following Christ is not just about "Jesus and me" but that discipleship means that we take our place in service and mutual support with other Christ followers.

Once the participants have finished their discipleship-voyage, time-lapse timelines, invite volunteers to tell about one or two of their significant transition points.

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 Heeding the Call (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Luke's account of Jesus' calling of his first disciples states that these novice devotees "left everything and followed him" (Luke 5:11). The passage does not detail precisely what this "everything" entailed, but the sweep of the Gospel narratives implies that it was considerable. Though Christian adherents in affluent settings generally retain the words associated with letting go, leaving behind, or forsaking what was in putting on the yoke of discipleship, many of us would confess that a part of us often secretly hopes that everything we will have to leave behind for Christ will not be very much. Depending on the time and our mood, we would like to hold on to a bit of our earlier attachments, our erstwhile greed and acquisitiveness, our old resentments, our former class perceptions. We would like following Jesus to be a value-added enterprise, rather than a value-replacement undertaking.

Bear all of this in mind as you lead this activity. As Jesus' first followers demonstrated time and again, this letting go of some things and embracing of others in Christ is not something that comes quickly or easily for those of us born of flesh and blood.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Luke 5:1–11. Read verses 10 and 11 a second time. Explain that this activity is loosely based on the childhood game Red Rover. Start out with two volunteers on one side of the room and the rest of the group members on the other side of the room. Give the instructions:

1. The pair will say in unison, "[Person's name from the larger group], let go and embrace Jesus. Join us as we follow Christ."
2. The person who has been invited will then identify two things: What he or she is leaving behind to follow Christ and what he or she is embracing in order to follow Christ.
3. When the invited person articulates what is to be left behind and what is to be embraced, as the facilitator you will write these responses on newsprint under the heading "Leaving Behind" or the heading "Embracing." Place the newsprint where it cannot be seen by the participants.

4. If both responses have not been previously given, then the invited individual will move to stand on the other side of the room with the persons who issued the invitation.
5. If either of the responses has been given previously, the invited person will remain in place.
6. Repeat the process until you have a sizable list of what is being left and what is being embraced or it becomes obvious that coming up with responses not previously given is becoming prohibitively difficult.

Call the entire group together and invite participants to read the lists you have compiled on newsprint. Ask:

- Do any responses need to be added? If so, what?
- Are there any responses that seem not to belong? If so, which ones?
- Which items on the list do you think are among the most important things that Christians are called to leave behind? Why?
- Which items are the most important things Christ's followers are called to embrace? Why?

5 A Picture of Forgiveness

Leader preparation: Forgiveness is often highly touted among Christians, but it can be challenging to practice. Jesus' words of forgiveness on the cross are in part so powerful because they seem so unlike anything that would come out of most of our mouths. Speaking the words "Father, forgive them" can be difficult for those of us who suspect that those offending fiends who wounded us knew exactly what they were doing and would do it all again if given half a chance.

But if extending forgiveness is a challenge, so is asking for pardon from those we have transgressed against. Asking for forgiveness demands that we give up our preferred role as innocent souls free of guile and malicious intent. We like to give the impression that we would never willfully harm a fly—and that if we did accidentally injure a buzzing insect we would immediately administer any necessary first aid.

It hurts to be offended, but to some extent it also hurts to forgive or to be forgiven. No, the pain is not as deep or permanently debilitating as the refusal to forgive, but forgiveness is serious medicine. And serious medicine tends to have temporary side effects that can bring momentary disequilibrium to our systems. Bear this in mind as you explore what must be released and what must be embraced to experience the ultimate blessing of being a follower of Jesus Christ who is open to forgiving and being forgiven.

Supplies:

- artwork: "Forgiveness," by Thierry Ona, <http://www.art.com/products/p12191417-sa-i2792541/thierry-ona-forgiveness.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=6c47c0957fdb4b65a64ba2cbe037088f&searchstring=forgiveness>
- writing paper
- pens or pencils

Distribute writing paper and pens or pencils. Ask group members to write down the first five words that come to mind when they hear the word "forgiveness."

Then call attention to "Forgiveness" by Thierry Ona. Invite any spontaneous comments or observations that arise as individuals ponder this painting, and

then ask the following questions:

- What attitudes do the two figures suggest to you?
- What might be the significance of the postures of these two figures?
- How do the images and the tone evoked by this painting seem similar to and/or different from your own experiences with forgiveness?
- For both the person seeking forgiveness and the person extending forgiveness, what is released in an act of forgiveness? What is embraced in an act of forgiveness? In what ways is an act or spirit of forgiveness a blessing?
- To what extent is the letting go and blessing of forgiveness inseparable from being a faithful follower of Christ? Explain why you feel your response to be true.
- What role does the ability to extend and receive forgiveness play in our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ?

Before ending this activity, give participants a moment to write down five words that come to their minds regarding “forgiveness” in light of the discussion and their consideration of the painting. Ask: *What similarities or differences do you notice between the words you recorded at the beginning of the activity and those you wrote down at the end?*

6 Whose Way?

Leader preparation: Narcissism and the marketing impulse in Western cultures are relentless and widespread. The consumer and marketing ethos is so strong that it is not unusual to see and hear disproportionate claims being made for all types of goods and services. Hair coloring or fragrance products can be touted as magic elixirs that make their users sexually irresistible. A particular brand of smart phone can be promoted in a way that implies that its possessor will automatically advance half-a-dozen rungs on the ladder of success. In this atmosphere, even the gospel of Jesus Christ can be marketed, particularly through certain books and seminars, as though it were just another resource that can be used to get ahead and achieve personal success.

The way of discipleship, however, is much more about Christ’s way than it is about the way to achievement and swift promotion. It is not that there are no Christians who stack up well in comparison to non-Christians in matters of success as assessed by conventional standards. It’s just that the way of Christ does not place primary, ultimate value on such things. In our journey as Christian disciples, one thing we find that Christ calls us to let go of is a firm attachment to our own agendas and our own need for status and ego-massaging achievement. As you work your way through this activity, keep in mind the disparities that sometimes arise between what we passionately pursue and what we are called to by the God who passionately pursues us.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- computer with Internet connection
- song: “My Way” sung by Frank Sinatra, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6E2hYDIFDIU>

With the participants, listen to the song “My Way” as sung by Frank Sinatra. After listening to the song, encourage group members to identify the dominant philosophy that the lyrics suggest regarding the following: openness to outside input; reliance on one’s own understanding; adherence to one’s own agenda; willingness to seek guidance

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Proverbs 3:5–9. Then pose the following questions:

- What do you find appealing about the philosophy expressed in the song “My Way”? Why?
- What parts of the song’s philosophy do you have reservations about? Why?
- What does the song imply concerning our willingness to let go of some things and move on to others? To what degree do you find the implication positive or negative?
- What do you find appealing about the approach expressed in the passage from Proverbs?
- What, if anything, do you find impractical or questionable about this passage?
- To what extent would it be possible to reconcile or blend the philosophies found in the song and in the biblical text?
- To what extent do you feel that the words of the song or the words of the Bible passage could be used as valuable guidance for a disciple of Jesus Christ who is attempting to live a life that blesses others?

Sending & Serving Activities



7 In the Days Ahead (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Post four sheets of newsprint around the room. Write each of the following statements at the top of its own sheet, leaving plenty of empty space for participants to write responses:

- One thing I have let go of in order to be a more faithful disciple is . . .
- As a Christian, I believe that I have been able to bless others by . . .
- A new path I might consider as I seek to grow as a Christian disciple is . . .
- A way in which I could be a greater blessing to others is . . .

Give some thought to changes you have made to grow in your life of Christian discipleship and what changes you see yourself making to more closely mirror the approach to life that Jesus embraced. In addition, consider the ways in which you are a blessing to those around you. You might even ask a trusted (and candid) friend: In what ways am I blessing to you, and what could I do to be a greater blessing? In addition to surprising your friend, you may receive some unexpected responses that will help you as you consider how best to walk in the way of Christ in the days ahead.

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint

Invite group members to take markers and move around the room, completing the sentences on the newsprint by writing their responses right on the paper. They do not need to add their names.

After they finish writing responses on the newsprint, gather the group and take a look at each sheet. Welcome comments about what is written on each one. Invite participants to volunteer anything they wish to say about how they completed the statements.

8 Broadening the Blessing

Leader preparation: During this activity, group members will consider the discipleship implications of the Beatitudes, particularly what role they might play in blessing those around them. In reading the Beatitudes, it is often easy to suppose that blessing the types of people mentioned there is the exclusive purview of the Almighty. Who, after all, could make peacemakers the children of God other than God? Who could cause the meek to inherit the earth, in any sense, other than the Creator, to whom all that has been made belongs? Nevertheless, part of what Jesus was addressing in this section of scripture was the ways the kingdom of God turns the conventional culture and expectations of the world on their heads. In the world as we know it, the meek rarely “inherit” any part of the earth that the brash and brazen consider worth having.

The Beatitudes are not just an indication of how God intends to someday upend the status quo and set things right. They are in part an insight into how those of us who are Christian disciples might let go of conventional societal perceptions and evaluations and participate with God in blessing men, women, and children for whom the idea of being blessed is as atypical as a Bengal tiger sporting a mauve polka-dot pattern on its tawny coat.

You may want to write the four discussion questions for small groups (given below) on newsprint or chalkboard before participants arrive.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Form small groups of three or persons each. Give each group a Bible. Divide the nine verses of Matthew 5:3–11 among the groups. No matter how many groups you have, be sure that each verse is assigned to a group—even if some groups are assigned more than one verse.

Ask the small groups to read Matthew 5:3–11 and then reread their assigned verse(s). Encourage them to think, in particular, about people in your own community who could be described in the ways those in the assigned verse(s) are described. In other words, who in your community might be described as “the poor in spirit,” “those who mourn,” “the meek,” and so on? Ask small groups to discuss the following questions:

- Regarding the people represented by this verse, how might our culture need to change in order for them to be blessed?
- How might the church need to change in order for these people to be blessed?
- How might each of you need to change in order for these people to be blessed?
- What might we do as a group to increase the chances that these types of persons might experience blessing?

After the small group discussions, invite the groups to offer some insights from their conversation to the entire group. In particular, encourage participants to consider what they might do as a group of Christ followers to extend the experience of blessing to the kinds of individuals reflected in the Beatitudes. The ideas shared might warrant follow-up and plans to take action together.

9 Clothed for Blessing

Leader preparation: Prior to the session, gather an assortment of old clothes and other apparel: pants, socks, shoes, hats, gloves, sweaters, scarves, bandanas, necklaces, bracelets, caps, shorts, T-shirts, shirts, blouses, swim trunks, sweat pants, and so forth. Attempt to collect as wide an assortment of attire as possible. Put all of these items in one or two cardboard boxes and bring them for use in this activity.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- assorted apparel items

Ask one or two volunteers to read aloud Colossians 3:12–17. After the reading, invite participants to name the things that the writer urges Christians to clothe themselves with. Ask: *Why do you think the writer felt it was important for disciples of Jesus Christ to “clothe” themselves in this way?* A number of different responses are appropriate. If it is not mentioned, suggest that one reason might be so that those within the body of Christ might bless others by the ways they behaved toward and interacted with one another.

Present the box of clothing items you collected. Give the following instructions:

Think of what you would like to be clothed with in order to bless those around you, particularly the men, women, and children that you worship with and serve Christ with on a regular basis. To help you in your thinking, look through this box for something that demonstrates your answer. For example, you might choose a sweater to indicate that you would like to bless others with the warm love of Christ. Or you might select a belt representing your desire to be a patient support to others.

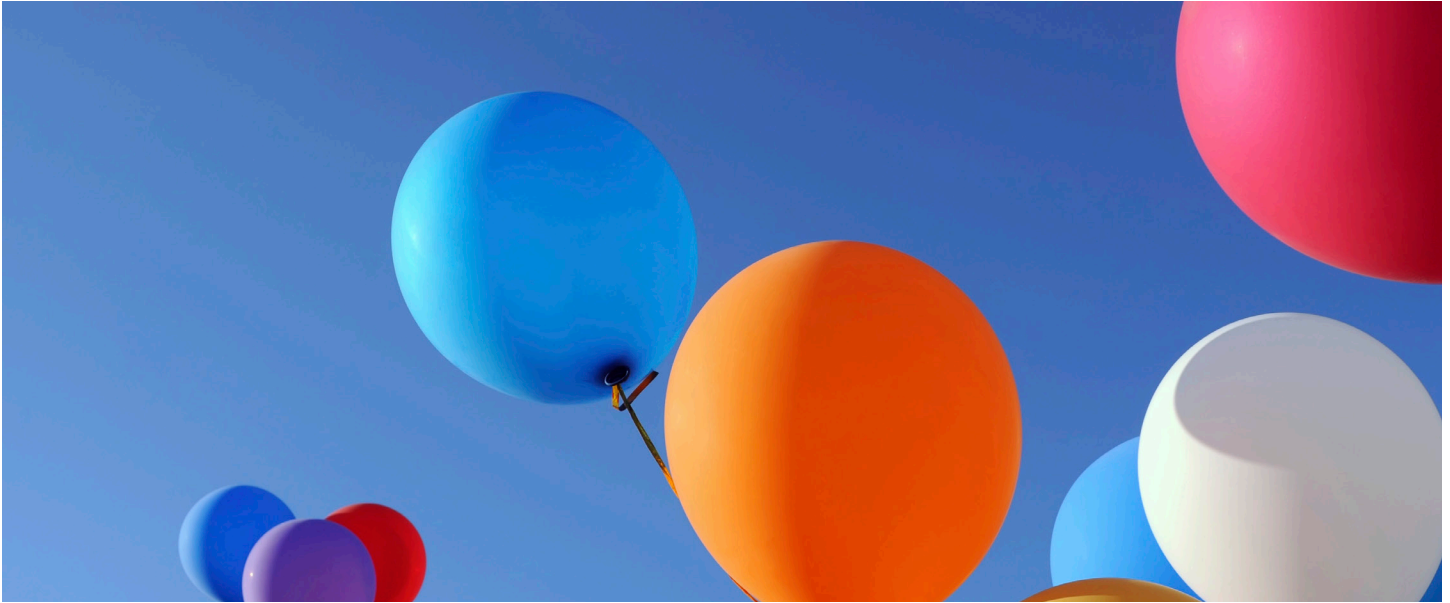
Reflect

What did discipleship mean to you before you began this Exploration? To what extent did it contain elements of surrender, risk, call, leaving behind, continual change, the release of bitterness and old grudges, a life that blesses even as it is blessed? How have your interactions with the other participants and your own wrestling given you a new lens through which to view your faithful walk with Christ.

Give group members a few minutes to go through the clothing items and collect their thoughts. Then, as the leader, start the “show and tell.” Once you have told about your item, invite volunteers to tell about their articles of apparel and what they would like to be clothed with in order to bless those around them.

Close with a prayer similar to the following: *God, clothe us with attitudes and attributes that are permeated with the character and essence of Jesus Christ, that as your disciples we might bless all those we come in contact with. Amen.*

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Age Group

Most adults live in an atmosphere where it can no longer be taken for granted that there is widespread agreement about the value and shape of Christian traditions, even within their own faith group or local fellowship. This can be disconcerting for some adults, but it can also be strangely liberating and eye opening. In this environment, adults can come to let go of a view of Christian tradition that regards it as a universal, set, infallible, unchangeable way of approaching faith—something that any acquaintance with the biblical texts and the historical record will reveal it really has never been. Instead, they can begin to see and celebrate Christian tradition as a body of practice that—like any living body—offers structure, but also grows and changes in order to continue to be a revitalizing blessing, rather than a restrictive burden, to each succeeding generation.

About this Exploration

As Christians, we are supported in the process of blessing and letting go by rituals that have grown out of the traditions of the church over the centuries, by the pastoral concern expressed by our faith communities in worship and other areas of our common life, and by the many acts of kindness and mercy extended to us in the name of Christ. As new occasions for blessing and letting go arise, we, as faith communities, develop new responses that may become part of our ongoing traditions. Although our behavior may be rooted in and shaped by our traditions, these traditions are not static. They are constantly modified and expanded as we move on in life. This Exploration provides resources for participants as they discern ways in which looking back on our shared tradition propels us forward into the future.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Psalm 148
Acts 10:1-48

Leader Preparation

The worship and other communal traditions of our faith communities remind us that blessing and letting go are not strictly individual experiences. To be sure we can feel blessed and bereft in isolation. But such experiences and occasions take on distinctive textures and accrue multiple layers of meaning when they are felt, tasted, and lived in community and solemnized by the ceremonies, ritual acts, and traditions that connect us to the “great cloud of witnesses” that are a part of our past, present, and future. During this session indulge yourself in revisiting traditions that have been meaningful to you and others in the group. Use the time, as well, as an occasion to attentively sense the direction the traditions of your faith community are trending in response to life as it truly is and to the eternally surprising, creative Spirit of God.

Prayer: God of all generations, grant me a heart of gratitude for the traditions that have blessed my life. Give me a receptive spirit so that I might become more open to traditions in the making that supportively undergird generations to come as they explore, change, grow, let go, and embrace. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities

 **1 Traditions We Have Known (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: Depending on one’s perspective, traditions can be considered banes or blessings. This is even true of traditions that are expressly designed to ease or celebrate a transition or offer a blessing of some kind. Whether a tradition actually blesses, irks, or leaves one feeling as lukewarm as a pitcher of milk left on the counter overnight to some extent depends on whether that tradition has become a mere formality or its meaning has been thoughtfully reflected upon and even creatively modified as time goes by. As you lead participants in more closely examining traditions they have experienced, join them in casting a thoughtful, sensitive eye on what you may have, at times, taken for granted. Consider not just the *what* of those traditions, but also the *why*. In the process, allow yourself to become a part of the moving streams of those traditions that can enable you both to experience and to renew what is best in them.

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Invite participants to identify traditions from their childhood and young adult years that incorporated within them some element of either letting go or blessing or both. These traditions could be ones practiced in their homes, communities, or churches. (For example, graduation, table grace, birthday traditions, baptisms, communion, weddings, funerals, holiday traditions, and so forth.) As suggestions are offered, write them on the whiteboard or newsprint. Once the list has been compiled, spark discussion by asking the following questions:

- In what ways did these traditional ceremonies, events, and acts connect to blessing or letting go?
- In what ways did these traditional ceremonies, events, and acts provide positive or supportive elements that you experienced as blessings or that helped you in letting go as you needed to?
- In what ways, if any, did you experience these ceremonies, events, and acts as negative? Why do you think that was so?
- To what extent are there things about these ceremonies, events, and acts that could be refined or changed and make them more positive, affirming experiences in the processes of blessing and letting go?

 **2 Culture Contrast**

Leader preparation: It is common to go to one of two extremes in thinking about the traditions and life experiences of people in cultures that differ from ours, particularly if those ways of life are less high-tech than our own. One extreme is to smugly take for granted that we are far more blessed and that many of the things we have had to give up and let go of have been for the sake of progress and have been worth the tradeoff. The other extreme is to romanticize what we see as being a more natural, innocent way of life to the degree that we idealize it and become blind to its costs and drawbacks. As you approach this activity, attempt to be clear eyed about the blessings, the challenges, and the letting-go demands that different ways of life have associated with them. This exercise is not designed to determine whether more modern or more primitive ways of life are superior. It is to explore the ways in which human existence—whatever its setting—can carry with it a whole range of blessings and losses that help define what it means to be a human being.

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities using at least one activity from each category.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Sisters in the Wind,” by Ethan Hubbard, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1102072326?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15626&store_id=1401

Display “Sisters in the Wind.” Ask participants to spend a few minutes thinking about these two young girls. At participants look at the picture, read each of the questions below. After each question, pause for thirty seconds or so to give group members time to ponder silently:

- What might you have in common with these two children?
- How might your life be different from the lives led by these two?
- What impressions do you get about the similarities and the differences in the traditions that you are familiar with and those that might be a part of the lives of these girls?
- What common blessing and letting go experiences might you share with them?
- What blessings might you experience that they do not?
- What blessings might they experience that you do not?
- What might you have to let go of to live in their world?
- What might they have to let go of to live in your world?

Once you have read the questions and given time for everyone to do some thinking about their own life and the lives of the young women in the picture, invite the participants to offer some of the thoughts and feelings they had as they reflected on the artwork.

③ Sheep of Another Fold

Leader preparation: This activity requires some prior contacts and arrangements. Make arrangements to travel to participate in a Christian worship service that is different from what your participants experience in your church. This could mean arranging to attend the worship service of another Protestant congregation or a Roman Catholic or Orthodox congregation. Or, you might choose to visit with a congregation that is part of your denomination but, because of ethnic or cultural history, takes an approach to worship that differs from what your group members are accustomed to.

In addition to arranging for transportation, contact the pastor or minister of the church you will visit in order to provide information about why you and your group members will be visiting. You might also find it helpful to arrange a meeting with this individual before or after the worship service. During this meeting your participants could be given some information about the traditions behind the worship. Ask the spiritual leaders you meet with to also share about how the concepts of blessing and letting go are reflected and addressed in their faith traditions.

Supplies: None

Well in advance, give group members information about the arrangements for visiting the congregation you have selected. Be sure to plan a time to discuss the experience after you have worshiped in an unfamiliar setting with individuals of a differing tradition. In the discussion, focus on the worship experience using the following questions.

- At what moment, or moments, in your visit did you feel blessed?
- What traditions of worship seemed familiar to you?
- What traditions of worship seemed unfamiliar? What reactions did you have to these unfamiliar elements? In what ways did they enhance your worship? In what ways did they distract or bother you?
- To what extent has this experience given you new appreciation for the blessings of another faith tradition?
- What former perceptions about the tradition you have now experienced might you consider letting go of? Why?
- To what extent has this experience given you increased appreciation for the blessings of your own faith tradition?

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Looking Backward and Forward (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Among the things that have shaped and influenced our lives thus far have been religious and spiritual traditions. Especially early in our lives, some of these traditions may not have been ones that we chose to embrace—they were a part of our family heritage. This activity gives you and the other participants the chance to review the religious/spiritual traditions of your past and consider your attitudes and feelings toward them. Perhaps more importantly, it gives you an environment within which you can think about the traditions from which you might draw meaning and strength in the midst of the transitions, the letting go, and the blessings that await you in the future.

Supplies:

- newsprint
- masking tape
- markers in a variety of colors

Post a piece of newsprint at one end of the room. Write this heading on the paper: “Traditions in My Past.” Post a second sheet of newsprint at the other end of the room. Write this heading on the second sheet: “Traditions in My Future.” (If your group is large, you might tape two sheets of newsprint together to create a larger space for writing.)

For most of us, our life journeys thus far—including the passages, the transitions, the letting go, the embracing, the blessings we have experienced—have taken place in the midst of the traditions of a faith community and, in some cases, of more than one faith community. Point out the sheet with the heading “Traditions in My Past.” Ask participants to use markers to list religious/spiritual traditions that have been part of their lives. Encourage them to add any words, phrases, or symbols to express the thoughts or feelings they have about these traditions as they look back. Then refer to the sheet with the heading “Traditions in My Future.” On this sheet, encourage participants to identify the religious/spiritual traditions that they think will be significant, meaningful elements in their lives as they encounter transition, letting go, embracing, and blessing experiences in the days and years ahead. As with the first sheet, suggest that participants use words, phrases, symbols, and colors to express themselves.

Gather the group and review what is written on both sheets. Invite group members to make comments about their own entries or the entries of others.

5 A Natural Chorus of Praise

Leadership preparation: We live in a culture in which the prevailing perspective appears to be that the plant and animal kingdoms exist largely to serve the purposes of human beings. Humans are viewed by many as the only beings with complex brains and spiritual wiring that enable them to apprehend the concept of God and to respond to the Creator with praise and worship. There are other cultures, however, in which the whole of creation is viewed as playing a significant role in reflecting God and rendering praise to the Creator. In this larger view of the entire created order, the whole of the natural world can help us better understand the cycle of birth, life, and death; the wonder of metamorphosis, transition, transformation, and rebirth; the poignancy of nurturing and letting go; the fearsomeness of violence and brutality as well as the sacredness of grace and blessing.

Plan to take the group on a brief outdoor excursion. This can be as simple as walking outside the building where you meet, particularly if you are in close proximity to trees, plants, and an open view of the sky. Another possibility would be a quick trip to an area park.

Psalm 148, if approached reverently and seriously, can help open group members to the possibility that things like heavenly bodies, weather elements, trees, animals, birds, and the creatures of the sea play a significant part in putting us in closer touch with the stuff of ever shifting life and the praiseworthy God who holds it all together. In anticipation of this activity, prepare one slip of paper for each of participant. Write the following questions on the paper:

- What do I sense of God in what I see around me?
- What praise of God, if any, do I find welling up within me?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- slips of paper

Before venturing into the great outdoors, provide everyone in the group with a Bible and with a slip of paper with the questions written on it (see above). Once you get to your open-air destination, ask the participants to find a place to sit or stand comfortably. Ask them to read Psalm 148 to themselves, and then to spend a few moments closely observing their natural surroundings, including the temperature, wind, and other weather variables. After a few moments, tell them to read Psalm 148 again and to ponder the questions from the slip of paper you gave each of them.

After a time, gather the group to discuss the following questions, either in your outdoor setting or back in your meeting room.

- What, if any, blessing did you experience or sense during your time of reading and observation?
- What of the ongoing, delicate natural dance of blessing and letting go did you sense through this experience?

6 The Flexible Framework of Tradition

Leader preparation: We rely on the traditions of our communities and our faith groups to help us understand our roles within broader secular cultures and within religious subcultures. At times, and among certain people, these traditions are accepted as taken for granted. At other points, these traditions can elicit skepti-

cism, harsh criticism, and vehement rejection. When firmly in place, traditions can provide a context and lens through which people view the rhythms and givens of life—including the transitions we work our way through, the letting go we are called upon to do, and the points at which life can be experienced as blessing.

As you approach this activity, help group members understand traditions as a potentially helpful framework for understanding life and for maintaining perspective and equilibrium amid the swiftly changing currents of the prevailing culture. In addition, however, encourage them to consider the possible benefits that can be derived from traditions that flex, grow, and evolve to better serve as a structure of blessing for changing times.

Supplies:

- song: “Tradition” from the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRdfX7ut8gw
- computer with Internet access

As a group view the video of the song “Tradition” from the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*. The full clip runs approximately seven and a half minutes. However, you can end your viewing at the 6½ minute mark since the final minute consists of the movie’s opening credits.

Following the video, open a dialog by posing these questions,

- What impressions do you have about the importance of tradition in Anatevka, the community of which the main character, Tevye, was a part?
- What positive role do you imagine tradition played in that village?
- What negative role do you imagine tradition might have played in that village?
- How do the traditions of Tevye differ from our own, for both good and for ill?
- What role did you sense that tradition might have played in providing a context for the ways in which the people of the community understood and responded to circumstances having to do with transition, letting go, and blessing?
- What role do our own traditions play in providing a context for such experiences in life?

Sending & Serving Activities



7 The Clean and the Unclean (Easy preparation)

Leader preparation: As with many things, traditions have both upsides and downsides. Traditions can provide a useful framework to help us order our universe, but they also can be utilized as barricades to bar certain people from entering our clique of blessed acceptance. While traditions can give us a sense of place, security, and surety in the world, they can also be used to exclude and put others in an inferior place. Traditions can open the door of blessing to some, while closing and bolting that door to others.

Acts 10:1–48 recounts the circumstances surrounding how the first Gentile convert to Christianity came to enter a fellowship that previously had been populated only by individuals who had come out of the Hebrew tradition. Most devout Jews of the first century—Peter included among them—would have considered Cornelius an unclean and unacceptable candidate for admission to their com-

pany. Through his sensitivity to the Spirit and vision of God, however, Peter was instrumental in helping his fellow Christians avoid the mistake of adhering so rigidly to their former traditions that they refused to admit Cornelius, and many non-Jewish converts to come, into God’s circle of blessing.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Begin this activity by asking participants the following questions:

- What makes a fruit or other food unacceptable?
- What makes an article of clothing unacceptable?
- What makes a book, movie, or television show unacceptable?
- What makes a potential marriage partner unacceptable?
- What makes a potential friend unacceptable?
- What makes a potential member of your church unacceptable?

As participants grapple with their responses to that last question, invite them to consider what light Acts 10:1–48 might cast on the issue. Invite volunteers to participate in reading the passage. Ask one individual to read the general narration, another person the words of Cornelius, another the words of the Lord and the Spirit, another the words of the men sent by Cornelius, and another the words of Peter.

After the passage has been read, invite group members to summarize what they consider the main points of this text. *Why did the author of Acts include this account?* Main points may include these: Cornelius was a Gentile, with whom many devout Jews of the first century would have deemed it inappropriate and even defiling to associate. In Peter’s vision, God urged him to eat meat from animals that the Jewish tradition considered unclean. When called to Cornelius’s home, Peter made a connection between the vision of the unclean animals and the people that Jewish tradition had branded as unclean and had excluded from God’s blessing. Peter responded by baptizing Cornelius and members of his household.

Sum up the discussion by asking the following questions:

- What might this passage say to us about traditions? When is it necessary to let go of our previous understandings and practices?
- What understandings of traditions might we need to consider altering in order to embrace those persons God wishes to include in our own time?

8 An Expression of Blessing

Leader preparation: This activity uses a traditional Hebrew blessing that is probably not part of the worship tradition of your group. It introduces them to a lovely song and reminds them that most of us too infrequently voice—in word or song—blessings to one another. You might want to listen to the song several times prior to the session.

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint
- song: “Shalom Chaverim,” traditional Hebrew blessing (tune: Shalom), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2pm6XGvnnc>, <http://www.musickit.com/resources/shalomchaver.html>
- computer with Internet access

Invite the participants to listen to a traditional Hebrew folk song. The song has been translated in several versions, but one translation says, “Goodbye and be safe, my friends.” The song goes on to refer to the blessed, eternal God who is good and who has created the world. Invite participants to listen to the song “Shalom Chaverim,” which you can access through the Internet links above. After listening, read aloud the lyrics.

Form small groups of three or four persons. Distribute markers and newsprint to the small groups and give the following instructions:

Take a few minutes to come up with a blessing you might say or sing to those you care about—family members, friends, or a segment of our society or world. You do not need to feel compelled to make the words rhyme or wed them with a melody.

After groups have finished, ask them to read the blessings they have created. End your discussion by asking: *In what ways might we become a living fulfillment of these blessings? In what ways could we become these blessings in action?*

Close by singing “Over My Head,” beginning with the verse “Over my head—I see trouble in the air” followed by “I see Jesus . . . ; I hear singing . . . ; I hear music. . . .”

Passing the Peace Redux

Leader preparation: It is likely that most group members have participated in “the passing of the peace” during worship. As with many deceptively simple traditions, however, it can be easy to intone the words and repeat the motions without considering their importance. In much of the biblical narrative, there really are no such things as “mere” words. The Genesis account describes God using words to speak creation and its creatures into being (Genesis 1). A spoken blessing, in Old Testament thought, was considered to have a palpable power for good that could not be withdrawn or amended. For that reason we read of Jacob conniving to obtain the spoken blessing of his father, Isaac, and Esau’s despair and anger upon learning that the blessing traditionally given to the eldest son had been uttered to his younger brother (Genesis 27).

The New Testament gives further evidence of the perceived power of word and blessing. It was with the words “peace be with you” that Jesus blessed his disciples who fretfully gathered behind closed doors after his crucifixion and resurrection (John 20:19–21). Again, these were not just pleasant sentiments, but words of blessing that were believed to have the power to confer what they expressed.

You may wish to use some of the thoughts from the previous paragraphs as you lead the participants in passing the peace. It is hoped that employing an additional element, as described in the latter part of this activity, will nudge participants in the direction of renewed attentiveness as they practice this common element of blessing in the midst of Christian worship.

Supplies: None

Ask participants to form a circle with their chairs or to form a circle while standing. In your own words, make the following introductory comments:

One of the most basic traditions practiced in the worship life of the Christian church is what has come to be known as “the passing of the peace.” The apostle Paul, who is credited with writing many of the New Testament epistles, often utilized in his letters words similar to these: “The God of peace be with you.”

Then invite the participants to pass the peace around the circle by using the following words:

Initiator: The peace of the Lord be with you always.

Responder: And also with you.

Encourage participants to express what they felt and thought as they exchanged words of blessing and peace with one another. *To what extent is this exchange a mere formality, and to what extent is it a meaningful blessing?*

As you complete the activity, invite group members to pass the peace around the circle a second time. In this case, however, ask the participants to add a few words when it is their turn to articulate the blessing. Suggest they use these additional words to express an added blessing for that individual. This should not be difficult, even if the two individuals involved in the interchange are unfamiliar with each other. For example, the exchange might go something like this:

Initiator: The peace of Christ be with you always—especially in times of loss and uncertain transition.

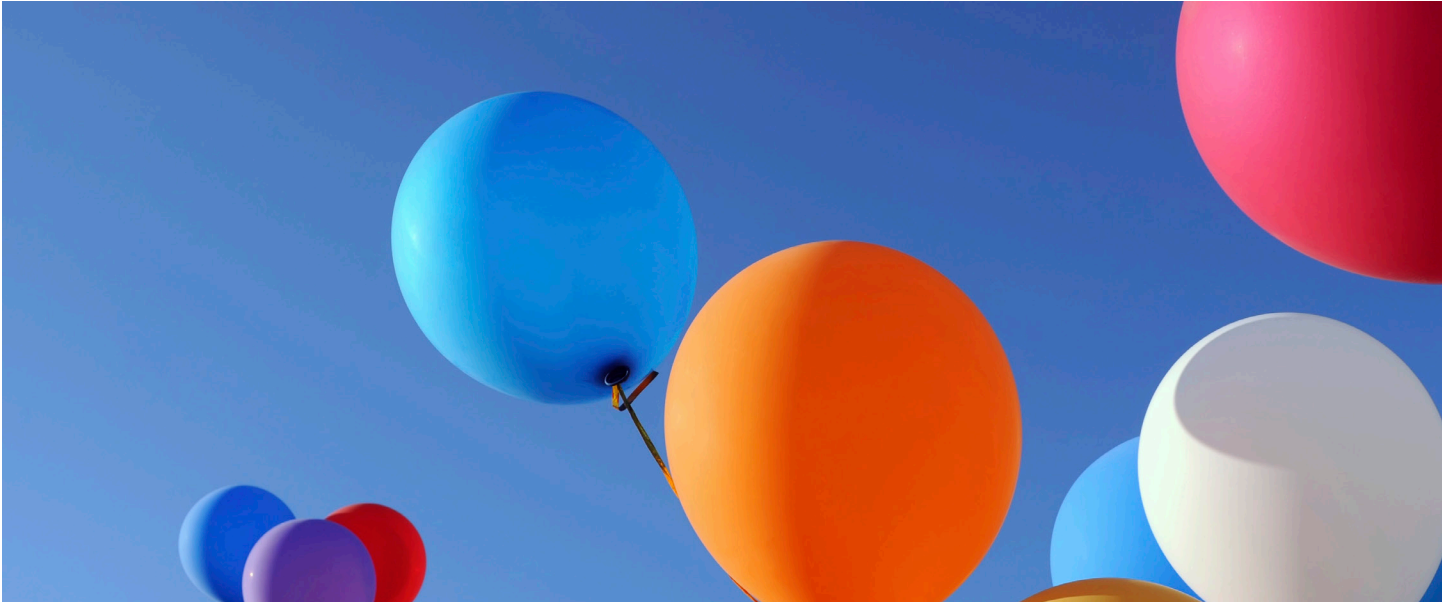
Responder: And also with you. this image of play and danger, joy and threat, in light of “Shotgun, Third Ward.”

Reflect

What fresh insights did you receive into traditions that have previously delighted, stupefied, or wearied you? What new connections did you make between the traditions of your faith community and the key moments of blessing and transition in your life and in the lives of others?

Look at the closing prayer for “Playing over an Adder’s Den” and decide which ideas from the earlier prayers and discussion would fit in the blank. One volunteer can voice these as the rest pause during praying the prayer together.

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Age Group

The term “adult” covers an age range that can span a half century or more. Talking about “adult” perspectives can be an invitation to overgeneralization. That is especially true where adults and Christian mission are concerned. For some adults, “mission” conjures up sepia-toned images of missionaries traveling to distant nations to promote the gospel of Christ (and the principles of the Western world). For other adults, “mission” can mean attempting to leave self behind and putting hands and feet to work to do the loving work of Christ, blessing we have been blessed. Give the adults in your group the individualized respect they deserve. Gently draw group members out; don’t pigeonhole them. Probe for participants’ distinctive perspectives and insights, and in the process, help them discover and articulate new ways of looking at seemingly familiar subjects.

About this Exploration

God’s call to blessing and letting go is a call to action. Those who receive a blessing have a mission to give a blessing. Responding to God’s call requires that we let go of the way things were and boldly set forth in response to the call, an active process that often involves hard work. We receive that call as individuals and also as members of the community of faith. When we let go of habits and comforts that threaten to impede our journey, and to which we cling, we are freed to go forth both as recipients and givers of blessing. In this Exploration we journey with ancestors who have been sent forth and have struggled with fear, promise, grief, and hope. Like them, we are called to lay aside material blessings so that we may open our lives to spiritual blessings in our context and mission.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Genesis 12:1–5
Romans 15:22–29

Leader Preparation

Though the desire for instant gratification is a strong impulse in the human species, the concept of sacrificing in order to make possible a future blessing is not something that is foreign to us. In our consumer culture, however, we are often encouraged to give up today only what might help us secure a bigger personal payoff in the days ahead. The circle of blessing in our society is frequently drawn just large enough to accommodate ourselves, our close kin, and good friends.

By contrast, in the kingdom of God Jesus enlarges the circle of blessing and the impulse to sacrifice by staggering, jaw-dropping proportions. Don't just love and bless you and yours, Jesus advised, "bless those who curse you" (Luke 6:28). In other words, bless those who are loved and those it would seem reasonable to loathe. That puts sacrifice and mission on a footing that is much broader and more demanding than what most of us would choose if left to our own preferences. In some ways it sounds like mission impossible—without a transformation born of the Spirit of Christ that results in some major letting go of our old self-focused characters, it probably is.

Prayer: *Self-sacrificing God, as I learn what it means to be made in your image, save me from my squeamishness and lack of enthusiasm. Strengthen my resolve to answer your call to mission, even when it takes more than merely skimming a bit*

Exploring & Engaging Activities

 **1 Call and Comfort Zones (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: It is often assumed, implicitly and explicitly, that God's call can only be experienced as a letting go, an uprooting, an about face, an alteration that is so deep and traumatizing that it leaves us shocked and traumatized. Paul's encounter with God on the road to Damascus and Jacob's hip-dislocating wrestling match with God are often pointed to as archetypes of call and response to God's mission.

And while the call and response to mission does generally entail a leaving behind and a shift in perspective, the question is whether it is always experienced as a great rending and shift that shakes us to the marrow of our bones. Although the biblical text obviously omits a great deal of detail, Mary's response to the angel announcing her role in the Incarnation of God seems relatively placid and mild compared to the experiences of Paul and Jacob—this despite the fact that Mary's response required a good deal of perspective shifting and letting go of what she likely expected life to be like as a young Jewish woman who was about to be married.

This raises a relevant question that has bearing on how we experience and assess the legitimacy of our call to mission: How much do the peculiar, unique boundaries of our own comfort zones have to do with our response to God's call mission? Consider that question as you prepare to guide the participants through this exercise.

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Invite participants to identify activities, situations, or demands that they find distasteful, uncomfortable, or burdensome. As suggestions are made, write each one on the whiteboard or newsprint. (Expect a wide variety of responses, including: public speaking, filing one's taxes, changing diapers, large social gatherings, noisy environments, working in groups, working in solitude.)

Invite participants to review the list that has been compiled and make any observations about it. Use the following questions to prompt discussion.

- What on this list of the noxious and onerous do you agree with? What do you disagree with?
- What might this list and our reactions to it say about individual preferences and comfort zones?

Invite participants to list examples of Christian mission. As group members make contributions, write their ideas on the whiteboard or newsprint. Expect a wide variety of responses, including: going as a missionary to work within an unfamiliar country or culture, volunteer work with those who are hungry or homeless, a short-term project to build or repair a building, visiting residents of assisted living facilities, volunteering to help with disaster response in a nearby community, tutoring students with learning challenges, mentoring troubled teens, speaking to someone about faith, participating in street evangelism ser-

of my excess blessing to pass on to others. Make me bold to let go and dig deep so that your blessings might multiply. Amen.

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities using at least one activity from each category.

vices, financially and prayerfully supporting church outreach projects. Point out that often in conversations about Christian mission, statements are made about the need to move beyond our comfort zones, to let go and move beyond our own reluctance and preferences. Pose the following questions.

- In terms of the mission that Jesus calls us to do, both as individual followers of Christ and Christian communities, what does it mean to say that we are to move beyond our comfort zones?
- To what extent is mission doing something that requires us to let go of what we feel comfortable doing and move toward that which tends to make us uncomfortable?
- What, if anything, might this say about the criteria we use to assess the legitimacy of a call we sense to God’s mission?

2 An Exercise in Reimagining

Leader preparation: One key to faithfully participating in the mission to which God calls us as followers of Jesus Christ is the creative ability to let go of former perceptions, some of them long held, and to reimagine possibilities. The early church, for example, at a key point let go of its Jewish-influenced perceptions of Gentiles as ineligible outsiders and embraced them as brothers and sisters in Christ. This reimagining attitude was reflected in Jesus’ teachings. For example, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43–44). In this way, Jesus helped redirect and recast the thinking and the actions of his disciples, using familiar precepts to take them to new places.

Mission, in many ways, reorients us in how we view and respond to the nearby and familiar, not just the distant and alien. Among other things it turns *them* into *us*, transforms the *reviled* into the *beloved*, and makes the *cursed* into the *blessed*.

Supplies:

- video: “Jonathan Winters Prop Improv,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHOy5gBJIm0>
- computer with Internet access

As a group, view the video “Jonathan Winters Prop Improv,” in which comedian Jonathan Winters uses two pens and a pen case as the raw material for some ricocheting flights of fancy. Once you have viewed the video, encourage a few volunteers to attempt to do their own versions of Winter’s brand of reimagining by using improvised props from your meeting room, articles of clothing participants are wearing, or objects they have on their person. Here are some examples of this reimagining:

- a wristwatch becomes a Dick Tracy style two-way radio
- a scarf or handkerchief becomes a cattle driver’s whip or lasso
- a chair becomes a monarch’s throne, racecar driver’s seat, or a beauty salon/barber’s chair
- a piece of chalk becomes an oversized dose of cholesterol medication
- a shoe removed from the wearer’s foot becomes a Venetian gondola for hamsters
- a sheet of paper becomes a gigantic flake of snow or dandruff
- a computer screen becomes a security surveillance monitor

Don’t take too much time on this, but see how creative group members can be.

At this point you might want to offer some of the thoughts from the Leader preparation material above to introduce the tie-in between creative reimagining and how we approach mission as faithful followers of Christ. Refer to the role that such reimagining can play in letting go of old perceptions as we seek to embrace and bless others in the name of Christ. Ask the following questions as you explore this idea.

- What perceptions might we have to let go of—what might we have to creatively reimagine—in order to engage in the mission to which Christ calls us?
- How might we need to creatively reimagine particular human stereotypes and long-standing assessments of the way society is structured?
- How might we need to creatively reimagine how we view and relate to certain other peoples?
- How might we need to creatively reimagine our actions and attitudes?
- How might we need to creatively reimagine the role and mission of the church and the people of the church as the body of Christ?

③ Two Views of Abram

Leader preparation: Make arrangements with four participants prior to the session. Explain that each of them will be paired with a partner. Both pairs will perform role-plays based on Genesis 12:1–5. These participants should read the passage several times and consult Bible commentaries or study Bible notes for insights into the passage. During the session, the first pair will play the roles of Abram (later know as Abraham) and the voice of God. Instruct this couple to perform the role-play with the Abram character being entirely compliant and quickly agreeable to what God is calling him to do. This does not mean that the Abram character cannot ask questions or try to probe God for reassurance. Nevertheless, he should primarily come across as nonresistant and ready to do what God asks.

The second pair will also play the roles of Abram and the voice of God. In this case, however, instruct the Abram character to exhibit more doubts, misgivings, and reluctance. In the end, the Abram character in this version of the scenario should respond to God’s call in the affirmative, but he should do so while appearing to drag his feet a bit.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- 4 people for a role-play

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Genesis 12:1–5. Then invite the first pair of volunteers recruited earlier to present a role-play based in which Abram readily agrees to God’s call. Then ask the other pair of volunteers to present a role-play in which Abram is more apprehensive and reluctant to embrace God’s call to leave his home behind and launch out into the unknown.

As an option, form pairs. Instruct one of the partners to read Genesis 12:1–5 aloud and then spontaneously role-play that person’s interpretation of Abram responding to God’s call with ready compliance. Then the other partner will read Genesis 12:1–5 aloud and spontaneously role-play that individual’s depiction of Abram as reluctant and fearful.

Following the presentations of both role plays, whichever approach you choose, encourage dialog by posing the following questions.

- Which role-play version strikes you as more reflective of the passage? Why do you think so?
- Which role-play version seems more reflective of how you or those you are acquainted with would react to God's call to launch into an uncertain future? Explain.
- In what ways do the biblical passage and the two role-play versions of Abram's response give us insight into what we are likely to experience as we weigh what we might have to let go of, leave behind, and trust in as we work through embracing God's call and mission?

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 My Personal Gift Bag (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Inherent in the call to Christian mission is the understanding that the gifts and abilities we possess are not ours to use and profit from without considering how they might benefit and bless others. Mission is an action-oriented enterprise, and one of the actions it begins with is moving away from a "me" mentality to an "us" outlook. Mission requires that we let go of building walls that block off and separate, and begin constructing bridges and doorways that connect and serve as entry points.

What are your gifts and abilities? How are they blessing your life? How are they blessing others? How could they bless others in new ways? All of these are good questions to ponder as you prepare for this activity.

Supplies:

- a small gift bag

Ask participants to form a circle. Provide the following instructions:

Let's imagine that this gift bag contains a talent or ability that you have. Perhaps it is a blessing from God. We are going to pass the bag around the circle. As you hold the bag, please name the gift you have been given and then answer two questions. In what ways has this gift blessed you? In what ways might you use this gift to bless others?

As the leader, model the instructions you have given by identifying your gift and answering the two questions. Then pass the bag to the person on your left, who will then respond—and so on around the circle. After the gift bag has made its way around the circle, encourage further discussion by asking the following questions.

- To what extent do you agree with the following? "God's blessings are given to us in order that we might bless others." Explain.
- To what extent is it satisfactory to profit from or to be blessed by a talent or ability one has without "paying it forward" in order to benefit someone else as well? Explain.
- To what degree does responding to God's call to mission require that each of us let go of solely focusing our talents and abilities on the benefit they can provide for us and find ways to use them to bless others?

 **5 Picturing St. Francis**

Leader preparation: As you prepare for this activity, you might find it helpful to read about St. Francis of Assisi and what he perceived to be his mission, not only regarding the natural world but in general. Helpful websites to consult include the following YouTube links:

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S70Rg3L-sEQ>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJZh561OpaM>
- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_5TtgwANDA&feature=related
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0VSyuar6oF8>

The following points include some brief information that may be helpful to relate to participants.

- Born in the late twelfth century, Francis was the son of a wealthy cloth merchant.
- Early in his life, Francis seemed to enjoy a rowdy good time and once volunteered to fight in the cavalry.
- Francis's father vehemently opposed his decision to take a vow of Christian poverty and responded with threats, beatings, and eventual legal action.
- Francis renounced any inheritance he might have acquired from his father.
- Francis believed that nature mirrored God.
- Francis reportedly felt great love for animals and had a special fondness for birds, referring to animals as his "brothers and sisters."
- According to tradition, during his ministry Francis preached a sermon to the birds and once convinced a wolf to stop preying on local villagers and their flocks.

Much about St. Francis is clouded in myth and traditions that are difficult to historically verify. Nevertheless, it appears that these are true.

- He was a person of great Christ-like compassion that extended to all of God's creatures.
- He was a man who knew what it was to let go of material comforts and concerns about how others might view him for the sake of pursuing what he believed to be God's call and mission for his life.
- He was a person who was intent on gently and graciously blessing all whose path he crossed: the wealthy, the poor, the powerful, the meek, the plants of the field, the animals of the earth, the creatures of the sea, the birds of the sky.

Supplies:

- artwork: "St. Francis of Assisi Preaching to the Birds," by Giotto di Bondone, <http://www.art.com/products/p11724653-sa-i1350212/giotto-di-bondone-st-francis-of-assisi-preaching-to-the-birds.htm?sorig=cat&origid=0&dimvals=0&ui=b2c89647ba56409d894161743bb14f5d&searchstring=st.+francis+feeding+the+birds>
- (optional) video: "Bird Songs," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rL4Z9d9oObY>
- (optional) video: "Morning Birds Singing in the Forest," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owRBZgoQnGM&feature=related>

Display “St. Francis of Assisi Preaching to the Birds” by Giotto di Bondone. To set the mood, you may want to play a recording of birds singing. Two YouTube links featuring bird songs are listed above. Allow at least one full minute for group members to ponder the painting without speaking. Then gently read the following questions, interspersing the questions at intervals with nothing but silence or the bird sounds.

- What thoughts and emotions might St. Francis have experienced as he approached and interacted with the birds?
- What do the facial expressions and the positioning of the body and hands suggest to you about the attitude of Francis’s companion?
- What do the facial expressions and the positioning of the body and hands suggest to you about the attitude of Francis?
- To what extent do the birds seem frightened or relaxed in Francis’s presence? Why might that have been so?

After viewing the painting, pose the following questions. At points during the dialog, you might wish to use information gleaned from the Leader preparation section or other reading you have done.

- How do you think people in our community today would react if they came upon a contemporary scene similar to the one depicted in the painting?
- How would you react?
- To what extent do the actions of St. Francis appear similar to or different from the behavior of pet owners toward their animals?
- Regardless of how reasonable or unreasonable it might sound to preach to the birds, what did Francis have to let go of in order to take such action?
- What similarities or differences might this have with what we are compelled to let go of in order to embrace the mission God calls us to?
- How do you feel about the appropriateness of referring to animals as our “brothers and sisters”? Why do you think you have that feeling?
- How might our concept and conduct of Christian mission change if more people felt a closer connection to the animal and plant worlds?
- What avenues of blessing might be open for those who feel a strong sense of connection to the natural world, contrasted with those who do not feel such a connection?

Sacrifice and Blessing

Leader preparation: Christian mission, at any level, requires some degree of letting go, loss, sacrifice, and dedication. Whether one is feeding those who are hungry by volunteering at a neighborhood food program or traveling halfway around the world to work in a denominationally sponsored relief program, there are things that must be given up in order to participate in the holy work of blessing others in the Spirit of Christ. The very least that is required is letting go of how one might otherwise have spent one’s time.

As you lead this activity, recognize that some may feel that gymnastic participation calls for sacrificing too much, while others will think the blessings and benefits worth the price. Do not be shocked to discover that your participants also have varying positions on what Christian mission requires. Graciously receive people where they are—do not try to push them to where you think they should be. Let go of feeling the need to have the group come to the “right answer” or

to “convert” those you feel lack sufficient dedication. Embrace the blessing of engaging in the process, inviting others to participate, and ultimately leaving the planting, nurturing, growth, and ultimate harvesting of good fruit to the ceaseless movement of the Spirit of God.

Supplies:

- video: “Gymnastics Training Montage,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4loaLGT2mLM>
- computer with Internet access

As a group, view the video “Gymnastics Training Montage.” The video runs a bit less than 3½ minutes. After seeing the video, ask the following.

- From viewing the video and what you know of the demands made on a gymnast, what must a gymnast let go of in order to train and compete?
- What are the deprivations or losses that a gymnast experiences?
- What are the blessings or rewards of this sacrifice and letting go?
- Where in your life do you feel you experience sacrifices and letting go that is in any way similar to what are required of a gymnast?
- What, if anything, would you be willing to approach with the sacrifice and dedication of a gymnast? Why? If there is nothing that would elicit that kind of letting go and dedication, why do you think that is so?
- To what extent do you think that Christian mission requires the sacrifice, letting go, and dedication that it takes to be a gymnast?
- What losses do you associate with Christian mission?
- What blessings do you associate with the demands of Christian mission?
- To what degree do you feel that Christian mission is worth what it requires of someone involved in it? Why do you feel that to be the case?

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Gift and Blessing Exchange (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This activity utilizes a portion of the apostle Paul’s letter to the church in Rome: Romans 15:22–29. In this passage, Paul touches on a principal that strongly relates to Christian mission: we might call it “mutual indebtedness” or “mutual blessing.” Paul pointed out the eagerness of the Gentile Christians of Macedonia and Achaia to donate and send money to those who were poor among the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (v. 26). In Paul’s mind that was fitting in that the Gentile Christians were in a sense responding to what they had received from their brothers and sisters of Jewish lineage. It was through the spiritual generosity of the Jewish Christians that the Gentiles had received the message of Christ.

Paul extends this idea of mutual indebtedness—or mutual blessing—even further by suggesting that he would like to come to Rome and be “sent on” by the believers there to further missionary work in Spain (v. 24).

There is little if any difference between Paul’s expectation of Christian behavior and what Jesus expressed when he said, “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded” (Luke 12:48). Among the things that propel us in Christian mission is the desire to pass on the blessing that has been bestowed upon us.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Form two groups. Identify one group as the Gift Initiators. The role of the Gift Initiators will be to come up with a gift they would like to give to members of the other group. Identify the second group as the Gift Responders. The role of the Gift Responders will be to “receive” the gift of the Gift Initiators and then determine what they would like to give to the Gift Initiators in return. For example, gift exchanges might be something like the following:

- The Gift Initiators give the Gift Responders a new SUV. In return the Gift Responders give the Gift Initiators a new minivan.
- The Gift Initiators give the Gift Responders the wish for long life and happiness. In return the Gift Responders give the Gift Initiators the wish for peace and prosperity.
- The Gift Initiators give the Gift Responders a toaster oven. In return the Gift Responders give the Gift Initiators an espresso machine.
- The Gift Initiators give the Gift Responders a new book. In return the Gift Responders give the Gift Initiators a CD of favorite songs.

Write two headings on the whiteboard or newsprint: “Initial Gift” and “Response Gift.” As the two groups offer their suggested gifts, write their gifts under the appropriate heading. After a few rounds from the Gift Initiators and the Gift Responders, reverse the roles and ask the Initiators to become the Responders and the Responders to become the Initiators for a few exchanges.

As a group, look at what is written on the whiteboard or newsprint. Invite any comments that participants would like to make about the exercise. In particular ask if there is any observation that could be made about the gifts that were suggested in response to the initial gifts.

One pattern that could emerge from this exercise is that the Gift Responders will likely attempt to give gifts to the Gift Initiators that are similar in value or in intrinsic “wow” factor to the gifts given to them. We see this kind of impulse in Christmas giving. Many people give considerable thought to giving a gift that is commensurate in value with the gift they think they will get from a particular person. If someone is likely to give them a bottle of imported champagne, for example, they aren’t likely to plan to give in return a thirty-cents-off coupon from the House of Greasy Burgers.

Ask the following questions:

- To what extent is it reasonable to feel a desire to give others a gift that is similar in value to a gift they have given to us?
- To what extent should gift giving be free of a desire to respond in kind to the gifts given us by others?

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Romans 15:22–29. Pose the following questions for discussion:

- At what points in this passage do you perceive a sense of mutual blessing?
- As followers of Christ, to what extent should we feel an impulse or responsibility to “pass the blessing on”? What role, if any, should this impulse play in how we respond to God’s call to mission?

- To what extent should actions taken to pass the blessing on be motivated from a sense of responsibility or a joyous desire to bless as we have been blessed?

8 Unintended Consequences

Leader preparation: One complicating factor in Christian mission is unintended consequences. This has surfaced time and again in the overseas and domestic mission ventures of various church groups. In earlier centuries in particular, missionaries from the Western world at times entered other cultures and, for the supposed good of those cultures, attempted to both share the gospel of Jesus Christ and impose the cultural outlook and framework that was the missionaries' own. The result was a disregard for and at least the partial destruction of the cultural rhythms and heritage of the local population. In this way, at times unintentionally, what was designed to bring blessing was polluted with nonessentials or distorted beyond recognition.

As sensitive missionaries and others of every generation have understood, Christian mission that intends to be a true blessing comes in the form of respectfully sharing rather than presumptuously imposing. It is a delicate, cooperative dance that is, in truth, usually far more demanding than unilateral actions. It requires listening as well as speaking, humbly relinquishing as well as insisting, recognizing the potential for delusion in what is usually seen as superior and the worth in what is often deemed inferior. It requires focusing on the true purposes and blessings of the kingdom of God.

Prior to leading this activity, visit the website of your denomination to glean information about the theology, philosophy, and history of mission efforts of your faith group. In doing so, you may also find lists of books and other resources that could merit review. Share any pertinent information and insights with your group members.

Supplies:

- a deck of playing cards for each pair of adults

Form pairs. Give each twosome a deck of cards. Encourage the pairs to build a tower of cards. Inform pairs, however, that they have some restrictions. One partner will be able to use only his or her right hand. The other partner will be able to use only his or her left hand. The partners also are prohibited from talking to each other.

Let the tower-building attempts continue for several minutes. Then call an end to the exercise and invite discussion with the following questions:

- How easy or difficult did you find it to build a tower of cards in this way?
- In what ways did you find yourselves unintentionally complicating the construction or undermining each other's efforts?
- In what ways might verbal communication have helped or hindered your efforts?
- In your experience, what complications have you run into in attempting to bless others through Christian mission, particularly as you worked in settings and within cultures different from your own?
- What unintended complications and consequences emerged?
- What things do you think could help to improve cross-cultural Christian mission efforts?

- What things might we need to let go of in attempting to be a genuine blessing through cross-cultural mission efforts?

9 Pie or Fish-and-Loaves People

Leader preparation: Christian mission requires resources of various kinds. For one thing, it requires human resources. As Jesus observed, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Luke 10:2). Christian mission also requires material resources. Here there also is generally a feeling of insufficiency, particularly where financial resources are concerned. Even Christ followers who are generous with their charitable giving often feel inundated with funding requests from their local congregation, the denominational programs of their faith group, and various parachurch organizations. It is also true, however, that there are many Christians who never really approach the limits of their capacity to give.

This activity approaches these tensions. It seeks to hold two strains in Christian thought in tension and balance. One is the point of view that says that before anything is started, including Christian mission, the cost should be realistically counted (Luke 14:25–33). The other point of view says that where the Spirit of Christ is concerned, it is often possible to see resources multiplied beyond “reasonable” expectations (Matthew 14:13–21). This activity does not aim to resolve the questions or ease the tensions. It simply invites group members to wrestle with what must be let go of and what must be embraced to pay the price of blessing others Christian mission.

Supplies:

- 1 pie (real or a photo or toy food)
- 5 loaves of bread (real or photos or toy food)
- 2 pieces of fish (real or photos or toy food)
- Bible

Place the pie on the table beside five loaves of bread and two pieces of fish. Ask the following questions:

- How would you go about dividing this pie among 10 people?
- How would you go about dividing the bread and the fish among 10 people?
- How would you go about dividing the pie among 5,000 people?
- How about dividing the bread and fish among 5,000 people?

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Matthew 14:13–21. In this story, the disciples play the role we sometimes assume: they see the need, assess the resources available to meet that need, conclude that the latter could never cover the former, and decide it would be a waste of time even to try. Jesus—by contrast—sees the need, assesses the resources available to meet the need, blesses the resources no matter how meager they appear, and sets about using the resources to bless those he can. Whether miraculously or ironically or both, in the end it’s the need that is dwarfed by the resources that become available.

Pose the following questions.

- As you consider your attitude about the call of mission—in surveying the need and assessing the resources available to bless others—would you say you are more of a cut-up-the-pie kind person? (We have only one pie, it can only go so far, and when it’s gone, it’s gone.) Or are you more

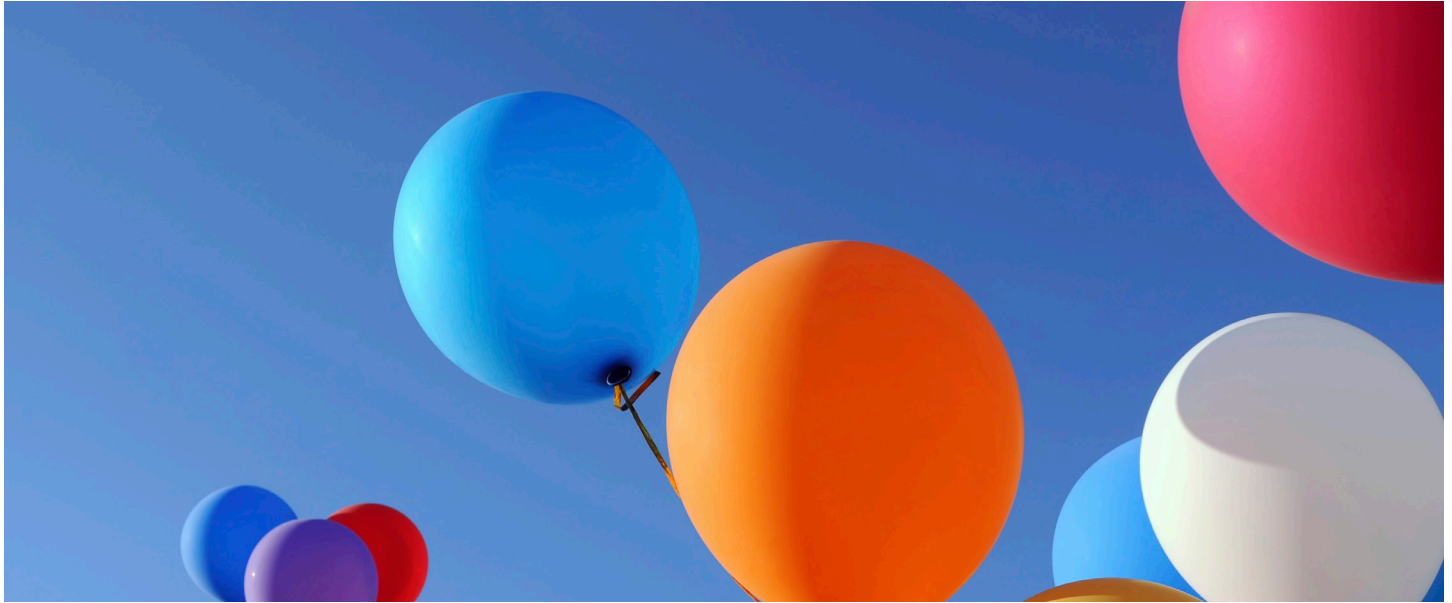
Reflect

As you have exchanged comments with participants and listened to their perspectives, at what points have you found yourself challenged to reimagine how you view Christian mission and your role in it in response to God's call? What do you sense you might be moving toward letting go of and leaving behind in order to experience and extend greater spiritual blessings?

of a multiply-the-loaves-and-fishes kind of person? (We are going to use what is available and expect that it will be followed by more than we now have.)

- What problems do you see with each approach?
- What positives do you see with each approach?
- What does Jesus' approach prod us to consider letting go of?
- What transformation does Jesus' approach challenge us to consider?

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Age Group

By the time they reach middle age and beyond, some adults are weary of change and transition. The disappointments and the losses have started to mount up. Transitions seem to demand more energy than these individuals feel they have. Like Atlas, they can feel that they are holding up the world—a world of woe. What have often been described as cynicism and world weariness can be symptoms of people who have taken so many blows that the thought of opening themselves to additional ache is more than they have the courage to bear.

Fortunately, loss and letting go can work to heal as well as hurt. In the presence of God's grace, and in midst of people who have been blessed by divine mercy, calluses that encase the heart can be softened. The willingness to open ourselves to the wounds that bring life can be restored. Future hope can beckon, and we can regain the courage to journey on.

About this Exploration

Experiences of blessing and letting go teach us there will be more change, loss, and grief in the future. Letting go is an essential part of our lives. Our resurrection faith provides us a vision of blessing and being blessed in the midst of letting go. Blessing does not come easily, and the process of letting go can be a painful adventure. Genuine hope is often costly and benefits from the courage of our imagination. The practices in this Exploration open individuals and congregations to the blessings for the journey when we are willing to let go.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Jeremiah 29:1–14
Luke 2:22–38

Leader Preparation

Whatever feelings—honest and deep down—that you have about the future are apt to be shared by the other participants. The future is both a place of implied promise and uneasy foreboding. It seems to promise much, because anything can happen. It seems to amp up anxiety—because anything can happen. Your leadership will serve participants well when you assure them that you share their hopes, doubts, fears, misgivings, longings, uncertainty, and anticipation about the future. Those who follow Christ are not people who know exactly what to do when called upon to let go and bless; they are people who know that even for Jesus it was not easy to face the future. Jesus, who appeared to sweat drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane, did not find letting go of his own will and blessing the world with his willingness to sacrifice his life to be trauma free. He did not walk through the door to that future without hesitating as he crossed the threshold.

Prayer: Eternal God, I do not know what the future holds of letting go and blessing, of tears and laughter, of despair and hope. But I trust that you go with me into whatever lies ahead. Bless me with your presence, so that I can come to know what it is to be transformed by your grace. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Blessing Casserole (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Luke 2:22–38 has several connections with blessing and letting go. Anna and Simeon were nearing the end of their lives. Though they were blessed by finally being able to see the Messiah, they would not live to see how Jesus would fulfill the hopes of God’s people. Nonetheless, Simeon in particular seemed willing to let go of life, so great was his joy at seeing the baby Jesus.

Through Simeon we also see the bestowal of a blessing that seems somewhat mixed, a kind of blessing casserole composed of seemingly disparate ingredients. To be sure, the main ingredient that Simeon spoke of was hope-filled and heartening. Jesus, he said, would be “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to . . . Israel” (v. 32). But there was more to the blessing than optimism and great expectations. There were traces of both sweet and sour, with flavors that possessed strong overtones of struggle, opposition, pain, grief, and despair. As Simeon said to Mary, Jesus also would “be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul” (Luke 22:34–35).

One thing the blessing of Simeon hints at, as does much of the biblical narrative, is that many of the things people tend to think of as opposites actually are contrasting, but necessary components of the whole. The wonderful and the woeful can be so intertwined within blessing that it is sometimes impossible to uproot the displeasing without damaging the delightful.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Form two groups. Ask one group to be the “blessing identification” people. They will name things and experiences that we generally identify as positives and blessings in our lives. Ask the other group to be the “yes, but” people. They will point out the complications, pain, frustrations, costs, and downsides that often accompany those blessings.

Invite the “blessing identification” group to begin. After each blessing or positive experience is named, invite the “yes, but” group to suggest possible drawbacks, annoyances, and sorrows associated with it. For example:

- The joy of birth brings with it intense contractions, sleepless nights, diaper changes, and care-giving demands.
- The heady excitement of a promotion can be followed by jealousy from coworkers, an increased workload, and disillusionment.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Luke 2:22–38 as others follow along in their Bibles. Invite discussion by asking the following questions. During the discussion you may wish to work in points for consideration that are taken from the Leader preparation section.

- To what extent do you tend to view blessings as thoroughly pleasant and free of disagreeable elements?
- What might this exercise and the words that Simeon offered to the holy family, and Mary in particular, say to us about the nature of blessings?

Session Development

For each session leaders may choose from nine activities that help learners engage the practice of faith. It is best to select at least one activity from “Exploring and Engaging,” at least one from “Discerning and Deciding,” and at least one from “Sending and Serving.” The first activity in each category is designed for “easy preparation” (able to be done with minimal preparation with supplies normally found at the church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities using one activity from each category.
- To plan a session of 45–60 minutes, choose four or five activities using at least one activity from each category.

- What letting go might be required in order to see blessings as a combination of delightful and displeasing?
- How might our expectations and our approach to life change in the future if we were to expect and give thanks for both the fragrant and the slightly fetid aspects of blessings?

2 Standing Still While in Motion

Leader preparation: When we are seemingly relaxed and at rest, all around us seems to be in motion, and actually, even we are in motion. Blood courses through our veins and arteries. Our brains process sensations and information. We breath, blink, digest, listen, look, think. Even while standing still, we are—in a multitude of ways—busy bodies. The notion of a status quo is an illusion. It may take decades, generations, or centuries, but just as mountains erode and change shape, so do the things that underpin and form a culture or society. This activity is designed to remind adults of the constant motion, shift, and transition that are part of what it means to be alive. It is a reminder that any blessing that comes in the future will come just as it has in the past and present—amid hustle and bustle.

Supplies:

- writing paper
- pens

If possible, go to a place in your building where you can observe the street or parking lot or a place where there is a great deal of activity. Supply group members with paper and pens. Offer the following instructions.

For the next three minutes sit or stand still and write down all that is shifting and changing around you. What moves? What changes direction? What alters in appearance? What sounds grow louder? What sounds grow softer? What speeds up? What slows down? What mood shifts do you detect on the faces of the people you see—and within yourself? Make note of anything that seems to be in some state of transition or motion.

After the observation period, gather the group back in your meeting space and discuss the following:

- What surprised you, if anything, about what you observed?
- What shifts and changes did you notice during the time you were observing and taking notes?
- What portion of the actual movements and shifts do you think you were able to detect and record? What might this say about the transitions and changes that we miss or of which we are not aware?
- What do your observations suggest about how change is part of the future?
- How might we prepare for the future and its challenges, so as to experience and savor the blessings that come our way?

3 A Letting Go Song

Leader preparation: This activity uses an old song as the entry point to explore some of the emotions and challenges associated with letting go. It invites participants to look back, but also encourages them to look into the future to some of the letting go that they will be faced with in the days ahead. Some of your group members will be looking at letting go that will be decidedly challenging and

in some cases poignantly difficult: career transitions, aging, illness, even death. Some are already in the midst of these and other transitions.

Take time to think about some of the letting go that you will be faced with in the near future. What thoughts and feelings are generated by what you see ahead? What can you begin to do now in order to help make the letting go as peaceful and as much of a blessing as possible?

Supplies:

- song: “Let Me Go Lover,” by Dean Martin, sung by Joan Weber, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hyLRbRCCLU>; lyrics, http://lyrics.wikia.com/Dean_Martin:Let_Me_Go_Lover

With the group, listen to the 1950s song “Let Me Go Lover.” After listening to this “moldy oldie,” open a discussion by asking the following questions.

- What kind of letting go is suggested by the song?
- What is your impression of how easy or difficult the letting go will be for the person whose thoughts and feelings the singer expresses?
- In terms of the level of difficulty, how have you experienced letting go? In what ways is your experience similar to or different from that expressed in this song?
- What positive experiences have you had with letting go?
- To what extent do you feel you are better at letting go now than you were earlier in your life?
- What letting go do you see in your future in the next ten years? The next twenty years?
- How might you prepare in order to do this letting go as gracefully and faithfully as possible?
- What Christian traditions, beliefs, perspectives, and attitudes might be sources of strength and support for you as you approach these times of letting go?

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 A Note from Exile (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: One gnawing feeling that we human beings often have to wrestle with is the perception that we have been dealt a bad hand. This feeling tends to crop up whether we have had to crawl on our bellies through the muck for most of our lives or have only occasionally gotten mud on the hem of our garments. Despite all the mud-free days they have enjoyed, most people are a little annoyed at the sight of that smidgen that gets splashed on them from time to time. So the disgruntlement and disillusionment of the people of God exiled in Babylon is not surprising. They considered themselves God’s chosen people. Yet they found themselves uprooted and covered with muck in a foreign land. That is where they were when the prophet Jeremiah relayed God’s message to them, the message delineated in Jeremiah 29:1–14.

With some elaboration from other portions of the prophetic message found in the book of Jeremiah, note some of the things Jeremiah conveys to them.

- Some prophets are stating that no one should unpack and get comfy because this exile thing isn't going to last very long. Those prophets are wrong.
- Get used to the idea of settling down for a while in Babylon. Build houses, plant gardens, raise families. It may not be the home you want, but for now it's the home you've got.
- Some good things are coming your way, but it's going to take a while—seventy years to be exact. Some of you won't live to see those good things, but your children will.
- If this doesn't sound like much of a blessing to you, take the long view. You are a part of something much bigger. Go ahead and weep, but learn to be thankful for the blessing that you have coming your way.

You might want to do some reading on your own to fill out the background of this passage.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- 4" × 6" index cards
- pens and fine-tipped markers

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Jeremiah 29:1–14. Briefly review the situation in which the people of Judah found themselves, using the information from Leader preparation as is helpful. Encourage individuals to imagine they were one of the exiles in Babylon and had just heard Jeremiah's message. *How might they have responded? What might they have written back to Jeremiah after hearing these words?* Distribute index cards, pens, and markers to send a postcard to Jeremiah. Encourage them to be candid and frank in what they write.

Once the participants have finished their postcards, toss them into the middle of the table. Shuffle the cards. Ask a volunteer to select one of the cards and read it aloud. Then invite the rest of the group to respond to what they hear. Do this with several of the cards. As participants respond to the cards, ask them to keep these questions in mind.

- What do the words and the tone reflected in this card say about what this "exile" was struggling to let go of?
- What do they say about how this "exile" viewed the future?

Observe that even though we may not be taken from our own land into another country, most of us experience exile at some time in our lives. Exile can be emotional as well as geographical. We can experience a form of exile whenever we do not feel at home in our world. Anyone who feels marginalized experiences a sense of exile. Anyone who feels misunderstood or ill-used experiences a sense of exile. *What can we learn from this passage—and from the exiles—about experiencing blessing and being a blessing in the places of exile we encounter?*



5 The Child in Us

Leader preparation: Jesus' biblical encounters with children are subject to a great deal of sentimentalizing and oversimplification. That is not to say that there is anything inherently wrong with some overtones of sentiment. We can easily draw conclusions that are too pat, however. Consider, for example, the assumption that as Jesus exhorted those around him to become like little children, the characteristics he was extolling were guileless innocence and unquestioning

faith. Those qualities may sound logical and conclusive at first hearing—especially if you haven’t spent much time around children. Any honest parent will tell you, however, that even very young children can shift from angelic to atrocious fast enough to give their parents whiplash. And as far as unquestioning faith, whoever came up with that interpretation obviously has not spent long periods of time answering a string of “Why?” questions.

Not to discount some elements of innocence and simple faith in what Jesus referred to, but there are scholars who believe that what Jesus was saying in his comments about children was similar to what he was saying in the Beatitudes: the reign of God is upside down compared to human powers and dominions. In the first century, children rested on societal rungs similar to those occupied by the meek and the poor in spirit. They appeared—and within the prevailing social order were—basically powerless. In other words, one thing Jesus was saying to those who looked longingly for the fulfillment of the future reign of God was this: “It’s not going to look the way you think it’s going to look. Let go of your preconceptions about power, who is on top, and what the pecking order will look like. It’s going to look like nothing you’ve come to expect. It’s the meek who get to inherit the earth, and it’s the children who get to sit at the adults’ table.”

Supplies:

- artwork: “Christ Among the Children” by Emil Nolde, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1725021198?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37961&store_id=1401
- song: “Jesus Loves the Little Children,” by C. Herbert Woolston, <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/j/e/jesloves.htm>

As you begin this activity, sing “Jesus Loves the Little Children.” If the group does not know it, listen to it at an Internet link given above. After the song, display “Christ Among the Children” by Emil Nolde. Take several quiet moments to study the painting. Then pose the following discussion questions.

- If there is any way in which you still feel like a child, how does that manifest itself? How comfortable are you with that feeling?
- What primary emotions do you detect in the children in the painting? What primary emotions do you detect in the adults?
- What do you think life was like for these children the day before they encountered Jesus?
- In what ways, if any, do you think the lives of the persons in this painting changed because of this encounter with Jesus? What leads you to believe this?
- In what ways do you think that the blessings the children experienced in encountering Jesus differed from the blessings the adults experienced? In what ways were they similar?
- In thinking about the painting, how would you describe the expression on Jesus’ face?
- Look at the child whose arms are around Jesus’ neck. Do you think that child had difficulty in letting go of Jesus? Why or why not?
- What attitudes, feelings, and experiences depicted in this painting do you feel are necessary for you as you encounter the changes, losses, and blessings of the future?

6 Becoming Pictures

Leader preparation: Ahead of time, ask participants to bring a few snapshots of themselves from earlier times in their lives. Group members will use these photographs to talk about who they were on their way to becoming at the time the pictures were taken. In other words, as a baby, they were on their way to becoming a toddler. As a Cub Scout or Brownie, they were on their way to becoming a Boy Scout or Girl Scout.

The purpose of this activity is to help participants think about what it means to consider themselves human *becomings*—not just human beings. In other words, we are always on the road to becoming someone who is different than who we are at this moment in time.

Supplies:

- snapshots of participants from earlier times of their lives
- several tables

Invite participants to display their photos on one of the tables. Encourage group members to mingle and look at the pictures, engaging in informal conversations about the photos.

After about five minutes, ask each group member to bring one of his or her photos and join in a group discussion. Ask for volunteers to tell about their photos by completing this statement: “At this point in my life, I was becoming . . .” For example, a person in a photo of graduate school may talk about being on the way to becoming a lawyer, or a person in a photo from the age of thirty may talk about being on the way to becoming a parent. Be sensitive as you listen to these stories. After all who want to have told a story, encourage further discussion by asking questions such as these.

- What common themes did you detect as group members told about their photos?
- What do our stories say about transitions, letting go, and changes in our lives?
- What did these individuals have to let go of and focus on to make progress on the road to becoming?
- What do you feel that you are on the road to becoming at this point in your life?
- What kind of blessing do you long to become in the future? What will it take for you to become that kind of blessing?

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Aspirational Biographies (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: During this activity group members will create six-word aspirational biographies, which of course is a bit of an oxymoron. Biographies are defined as stories about our past. But the biblical narrative is filled both with stories about the journey of the people of God from generations past and with image-rich hints of what is to come. Although the Book of Revelation is often misused to link its words to current events and tortured scenarios about the end times, it is a book about the ultimate triumph of God and God’s people against the forces of death and loss and estrangement. It is a symbol rich exploration of

the letting go of existence as it has been and the emergence of God's righteous realm as it will be. It is about the completed transition from existence as antagonism, struggle, and loss to the emergence of undiluted, ongoing blessing in the presence of God. So, in that sense, Revelation and a good many of the words of the Old Testament prophets are aspirational biographies of the future community of the people of God.

Supplies:

- index cards
- pens

Distribute index cards and pens. Give the following instructions.

Spend a few minutes thinking about how you envision your future, especially as it concerns the transitions and letting go that you anticipate you will encounter. Also think about the blessings you anticipate. Although you do not need to totally exclude material elements, focus primarily on the emotional and spiritual aspects of your life and your relationships with others—including your relationship with God. After you've given this some thought, use the index card to write down a six-word aspirational biography. In other words, capture in six words a summation of your hopes for the life that lies ahead for you. These words can form a sentence, but that is not a requirement.

After participants have had some time to ponder and write, encourage them to read their biographies to the group. You may even wish to display these cards on a bulletin board in the room where you meet.

The following are some examples of six-word aspirational biographies.

Release control; abide faithfully; give grace.

Bend without breaking; love without ceasing.

Acknowledge loss; give thanks; spread joy.

Grieve losses; journey on; celebrate blessings.

Select two or three of the cards and use them to form parts of an aspirational prayer. Read the words on the cards, a phrase at a time, and have the group members repeat those same words. Close with "Amen."

Picture This

Leader preparation: Since we have so much difficulty accurately recalling and describing what has actually happened in the past, it should come as no surprise that a full-bodied, realistic envisioning of what is yet to be tends to elude us. Our thinking about the future is apt to veer between skittish avoidance and unrealistic air castle construction. We don't like to consider the worst that could—and many times will—happen, so we spend our time daydreaming about what is unlikely to occur. We are quick to banish thoughts about illness, failures, personal weaknesses, relational tensions and ruptures, leave takings, and death. On the other hand, we can be slow to let go of the hope that life might one day grant us growth without pain and perspiration, love without emotional bruises, peace without honestly working through conflict, security without anxiety, and blessing without even the hint of remorse.

As you guide participants in envisioning and picturing the future, encourage them to take an honest look at what they are likely to face—the good, the bad, and the ugly—and the prerequisites and the costs that are a necessary part of experiencing and being a blessing.

Supplies:

- digital cameras
- computer or monitor to view photos taken by participants

From groups of four or five persons. Give each group a digital camera and the following instructions.

Use the camera and the members of your group to create a picture—a vision in digital-image form—of the future you would like to be a part of creating. Do this by arranging the members of your group to convey your ideas about the future. Utilize their body postures, their facial expressions, their arm and hand positions to help communicate the message. For example, two members of one group might be positioned so that their arms are outstretched and their fingers are barely touching to suggest a parting or letting go. Two other members of the same group could be gently resting their hands on the other two members as a symbol of support and blessing. Arrange your group members and take the picture.

Later, gather the group to view the photos taken by the small groups. Ask each small group to tell about its photo, adding any clarifying comments. Spark discussion with the following questions.

- What do you see in the pictures that speak to you of transition, letting go, and blessing?
- What does this say to you about your own vision and hopes for the future?

Blessed Children

Leader preparation: In a world that shakes, quakes, and takes, few adults do not feel like fragile, bereft children at moments of peril, pain, and loss. It is as bereft children that we need a God who blesses. It is as blessed children that we are called to reach out to other quivering and disoriented brothers and sisters of the human race who are experiencing their own shattering convulsions and losses. It is as the hand of God reaches out to rest upon our heads that we are enabled to rest our hands upon the heads of others, so that they also might know the blessing that comes within the circle of God's sustaining, transforming love.

Supplies:

- song: "Go, My Children, with My Blessing" by Jaroslav J. Vajda (tune: Ar Hyd Y Nos), <http://rockhay.tripod.com/worship/music/gomychild.htm>; video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0cDz1ufQSgA> ; audio, http://www.hymnary.org/text/go_my_children_with_my_blessing
- computer with Internet access

Sing or listen to the song "Go, My Children, with My Blessing." Use hymnals or songbooks that include this song, or listen to the song with one of the links listed above. Invite group members to identify the declarations contained in the hymn. For example, we are God's children; God blesses us; we are God's forever.

Then pose the following questions.

- How does knowing that we are not alone affect how we approach the things we must let go?
- As we make decisions and take actions in the midst of a world of unremitting transition, what shape might our future take when we remember we are in relationship with the forever, ever-present God?
- As we think about our vision of the days to come and our service as Christian disciples in that future, what does being blessed as God's children say about our relationships with God's other children in our churches, our communities, and our world?
- To whom would you like to offer this song of blessing today?

Reflect

The future is both near and far. It is as near as the next tick of the clock. It is as far as the unfolding forever of the reign of God. How have these activities refreshed and reoriented your vision of the future? What have group members expressed about the challenges and joys of blessing and letting go?