



Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Discovery

About this Age Group

We have several categories of participants in this Exploration: seekers, new church participants, frequent attendees, and established members. Each group has different expectations and brings various hopes and assumptions, as well as unexpressed but very real needs and desires. Our challenge is to welcome each and all! Seekers may have no previous history of church attendance and may not know the “basics”: the Prayer of Our Savior (the Lord’s Prayer), the words to the Doxology, why we offer the Peace of Christ to one another with smiles, handshakes, or hugs. New church participants might have a past history with a faith community, sometimes painful, sometimes fulfilling. Assumptions come with that past history. It’s helpful to ask and listen to people who are coming from another church, or from time away from church.

Frequent attendees have not usually committed themselves to membership, although they might participate joyfully in the life and service of the community. Established members in this community may assume that the life they live in the church is the “right” or the “best” way and that people who consider attending worship and offering their time, talent, and treasure to the work of the community will change to fit into the church as it is right now. We’ll invite established members to move over and make a space for newer people and different practices. It’s helpful to keep in mind that we don’t wear the same shirt every day or sing only one hymn or have a single friend.

We’ll discover together how to experience beauty in familiar and new ways, so that our worship is enriched both by tradition and by different ways of expressing our love for God, following Jesus, and discerning the invitation of the Holy Spirit in the life of our faith community. As we discover, we’ll find that our whole lives become blessed with depth and meaning.

About this Exploration

Experiencing beauty connects us with God in ways beyond our understanding. It grounds us and startles us awake with the reality of the Divine all around and within us. Beauty is not perfection or flawlessness but reality and vulnerability, brokenness and transformation. When we open ourselves to the Holy, we discover beauty everywhere, from the endless reaches of the universe to the intricacy of the atom. We find awe and wonder in all of life—the “Ah!” that takes our breath away and moves us toward connection with the whole of creation—and we grow in our understanding of the ways in which God loves and treasures us.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Genesis 28:10–19a
Matthew 6:24–34

Leader Preparation

You get to offer hospitality to new ideas, long-established practices, surprises, and perhaps some anxiety. You may engage with people who have a childhood memory of participating in a faith community, helpful or not. Some have no experience of church at all; others have been faithful participants who understand that sincere and warm invitation to others is healthy and helpful for the established community as well as to newcomers. This Exploration celebrates the surprise, newness, and comfort of experiencing beauty as a path to worshipping joyfully. Bring your own joy, your own delight, and welcome others.

Participants and leaders will find it helpful if each person can see all others during discussion or sharing times. Tables are helpful, but not required, for holding Bibles, hymnals, or other materials.

Prayer: God of delight and discovery, you invite us, you call us, and you offer us blessings beyond our wildest dreams. Be with us as we invite your people to ask, to explore, to discover, and to find satisfaction in your beauty. Let us hear your voice

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Noticing the Beauty (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Sometimes, especially when tension and stress dominate our experience, we're helped out of despair by being invited to notice something else. Look up “beauty” in a dictionary, a thesaurus, or online, and have several definitions and similes available to offer the group; write each on a slip of paper. Think about what makes beauty: each of the five senses is involved, but beauty may be an experience, a feeling, an inspiration, or an idea as well. Be prepared to help participants expand their particular understandings of the ways they experience beauty.

Supplies:

- Bibles

Provide background information about Jacob. He has fled his family's home because he fears for his life. His brother is angry with him. Read Genesis 28:10–19a, and sit quietly for about 30 to 60 seconds to meditate on the passage. Then lead a sharing time, using these or similar prompts:

- When have you been in a difficult situation and been surprised by beauty?
- Jacob took a rock as a memento. What ordinary situations sometimes bring you beauty?
- What practices of memorializing special people, events, or objects have you tried?

As a beginning of an ongoing spiritual practice, suggest that participants make a note of three experiences of beauty each day, either when they retire, or when they arise. If time allows, the group can craft a simple thanksgiving practice that each can offer whenever the opportunity arises: a brief prayer of thanksgiving or a gesture that invites the body into the act of praise, such as folding, opening, or lifting hands, or raising the face toward the sky, or placing a hand over one's heart.

2 A Cup of Tea

Leader preparation: Before the group gathers, test your tea by steeping an ordinary tea bag in cool or lukewarm (but not hot) water. You want to make sure your tea bag will make tea within the time allotted for the activity, slowly but surely turning clear water into tea. Herbal teas often need boiling water, so inexpensive plain black teas, such as are found in many church kitchens, will be a better choice in this case. You might find that your water needs to be lukewarm or warmer to steep the tea bag. Boiling water will make it steep too quickly! If time

in the simplicities and the complexities of creation and of life, and may we share this beauty with all we meet. 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.

allows, go ahead and make a pitcher of tea; then share it, either hot or iced, as a practice of hospitality and friendship.

If possible, gather around a table or tables, so people have space for their Bibles and can see the tea steeping. If tables are not easy to use, place the cup of water and the tea bag in a place where all can see the change happening.

Read 1 Kings 19:11–12. Beauty can be found through all five senses, and sometimes in their absence, as with the sound of God *not* in the wind, or in the earthquake, or in the fire, but in the sound of sheer silence following all that turmoil. Today, we’re listening for the beauty of silence. Use your own words, or borrow from the activity description.

Supplies:

- Bible
- clear mug, glass, or pitcher of lukewarm or cool water
- plain (not herbal) tea bag (or more for a pitcher)
- hymn: “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projector

Read 1 Kings 19:11–12. Invite the group to experience a meditative activity, with quiet time spent watching tea brew in a glass (or clear mug) of cool water. Using the following paragraph or your own words, speak quietly about the ways we learn and discover beauty around us, and the ways beauty sinks into our lives, deepening our appreciation for the world around us.

As tea leaves turn clear water to a rich, tawny, delicious beverage, so too does the recognition of something beautiful turn our plain lives into flavorful and abundant lives of appreciation and worship of our Creator. Watching tea brew reminds us that many times change is gradual. Seldom is the immediate recognition of beauty the only piece of the process. The discovery of a crocus peeking at us out of the snow is just the first promise. Dawn takes time to move into the fullness of the sunrise, and often the most colorful moments are before the sun comes up. Bright crisp autumn leaves take months to arrive at the peak of color, moving from winter’s bare branches through the light green buds and rich dark green leaves of spring and summer. An infant is in some ways the whole person, and at the same time, just the beginning.

Play the YouTube video for “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.” Invite people to watch and to appreciate the beauty of the changes all around them, happening silently as the tea leaves transform the water.

Time is an important part of the process of becoming beautiful, or of discovering beauty. Have patience . . . Take time . . . Watch. . . Wait . . . and thank God.

③ A Space Walk

Leader preparation: The space in which faith communities gather is perceived as holy ground, whether it is a dedicated church building, a storefront, a park, or a rented room. Invite people to share stories about your community’s space, and to talk about what makes this place special for them. If you have time to find a few willing volunteers, invite two or three members or frequent visitors to attend the gathering to tell one story apiece about a spot in the building that is special or sacred for them. Planning this gathering includes talking beforehand with each storyteller so they understand that they are helping make a new place more comfortable for new church participants. You will also be able to calculate how

many stories the group has time to hear. Ask each storyteller if he or she minds being asked questions.

People in your faith community who have stories to tell about the building in which you meet can bring richness and depth to the understanding of a holy place, a place of beauty where we meet God. All will have the opportunity to listen to the stories, and the storytellers will get to know the newer friends and visitors. Sharing helps hospitality happen, as friendships and respect grow.

Note: This exercise involves moving around the faith community's space or building. Remember to take into consideration those who may have trouble moving from place to place, and adjust the activity accordingly. For instance, if there are inaccessible places, be prepared to listen to those stories in your usual gathering place.

Supplies:

- invited guest storytellers

Whether the faith community meets in a dedicated church building, rents space in a community center, or shares with another congregation, the location has stories within its walls. Seekers and new church participants can learn about the character of the community by hearing its stories. Members of the community discover and create sacred space, holy ground, as they live with and within the faith community. This is a time to hear some of the stories that make this place holy for individuals.

As a group, walk around the building where you gather. What sights, sounds, smells, and textures does the group find lovely? What is the scenery outside the building? Can you see through windows to the outdoors? Invite guests to share their favorite places in the building. Why are they special? Ask participants to share about their favorite spots. What makes them beautiful? A word of welcome, a memory of a good conversation? Artwork on the wall? Enjoy sharing beauty with one another.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Body Beauty (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: A portion of this exercise takes place sitting on the floor (just so no one falls off a chair while moving in new ways), so encourage participants to wear comfortable clothing. Suggest bringing a large towel, a yoga mat, or carpet sample to sit on, and plan to have a few extras for those who don't have one. We won't be doing any rigorous exercise, but we do want people to be safe. This is practice in wonder and laughter.

A prayer for the group: *Thank you, Creative God, for our bodies, no matter how much we complain about them. They hold our bones and our blood; they take us from place to place; and they rest with us while we sleep. We don't know much about our bodies, but we're willing to learn and to be amazed. Help us find the beauty in our bodies, for you created us in loving and surprising ways. Amen.*

Supplies:

- Bibles, preferably in several translations, with a place mark at Psalm 139
- (optional) mats or towels to sit on
- a few 36" or 72" measuring tapes (if readily available)

Begin by reading Psalm 139:1–18. Allow a few moments for silent reflection.

The human body is an amazing, God-planned, God-created, complex, wondrous design. As a particular exercise in discovery, invite participants to investigate some of its many surprising characteristics. Because each human body is individually formed, these few suggested activities are general, not specific. None of us precisely fits the mold! These ways of seeing our bodies come from portrait painters who depicted human figures long before photography. Enjoy the “Aha” moments of discovery, and invite yourselves to wonder at the complexity and simplicity of our crafting.

- Your hand is as long as your face: place the heel of your hand on your chin. Your longest finger will touch your hairline.
- Your foot is as long as your lower arm: Sitting on the floor, place the heel of your foot at your elbow. Your longest toe will touch your wrist.
- Your spread fingers, from little fingertip to the tip of your thumb, is a constant; you can use it to measure, even if you forgot your tape measure.
- Your waist folds your body in half—approximately. You know from finding clothes that fit that everyone’s legs aren’t the same length, even if the label says we’re wearing the same size. Our shoulders aren’t all the same width, either. If we measure from the floor to our waist and from our waist to the top of our heads, we’ll find that about half our height is below the waist, and half is above, with a variation of as much as 6” among different bodies.

What else is surprising about the ways in which human bodies develop as we grow from infancy to adulthood and into comfort with our own bodies? Can we see our variations as the wondrous diversity within God’s creation? What part of our attitudes do we need to work on? Invite conversation from the group.

End with a circle prayer, inviting each person to offer a thought about what has been discovered, beginning and ending with offering thanks.

5 Seeing with New Eyes

Leader preparation: Gather some items that people may not, at first glance, find beautiful. How about rocks, old clothing, scraps of paper that hold a memory? Ponder what stories these items could have to tell. How might they be remembered by people as being beautiful? Why?

Supplies:

- objects that people may not associate with beauty

We all have opinions, and we all see the world through our own eyes. In community, we are invited to hear the ideas of others. We learn from our community and we teach, often at the same time. Our time today deals with finding new ways of seeing and with learning to move our minds toward possibility.

Set out the items that you brought. Invite people to examine them. Invite each person to comment on why one of the items may be considered beautiful. The group might have suggestions for how items may be made lovely, or understood differently, or changed. A wet leaf may dry off and become the memento of a time spent with friends. An old T-shirt has stories to tell.

Invite people to name items they cherish that may not be understood by others to be beautiful. *What makes them treasures?* As personal stories are told, the feeling of

community increases. Establishing relationships brings hope and a new understanding of being whole, being loved, and finding hope.

A prayer for the group: For possibilities and for new ideas, we thank you, loving God. For fresh perspective and hope, for laughter and tears, for discovery and delight, we thank you. May we find in our own hearts the joy of your presence; may we share your love with our friends, those whom we know, and those whom we will meet. Amen.

⑥ What Does Belonging Feel Like?

Leader preparation: People who have been on the outside are often hesitant about attempting to be on the inside. Churches struggle to find language that will invite others to come in, and some people within the church struggle to make a place for those who are different from them in dress, thought, theology, speech, or need. We'll move today from talking about what helps each person feel welcome (perhaps why each person came to participate in this group, or this community), through crafting a statement of invitation and welcome that might be used either in this small group setting or in this church.

Stories of exclusion might be shared. While listening carefully, guide those stories toward the positive, helping the storyteller reshape the story in terms of what might have helped invite, instead of what limited, hurt, or excluded. You may want to use the metaphor of carving a statue: the image is complete once everything that is not the statue is removed. We can remember that sometimes the positive is carved out of a block of negative by removing the negative or hurtful so that the positive attributes can be seen.

Invite active participation by asking for a volunteer scribe or two to record the ideas and suggestions.

Supplies:

- Bibles, in several translations, if possible, place marked at Ephesians 2:11–22
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- masking tape or sticky tack

The letter to the Ephesians addresses the “us and them” mentality that leads to divisiveness, hatred, alienation, and a loss of hospitality. Read Ephesians 2:11–22. Note that the writer invites his audience to cease building fences between people and to begin seeing one another in light of Jesus’ message of inclusion.

There is great beauty in belonging. Many faith communities strive to begin their demonstration of extravagant welcome by making a statement, then living into it through their worship, ministries, attitudes, and actions. Ask what might be our statement of welcome for this group. *What words might we include?* Some words to get you started: comfort, safety, friendship, challenge, support, education, laughter, delight, love. What phrases sound inviting? List the group’s ideas on newsprint or a whiteboard.

Craft a statement for a church you’d like to be a part of. When the group is satisfied, post it in a prominent place, so that others can see what has been created. If possible, add a blank sheet of paper and a pencil or marker, so that readers of the statement can add their own suggestions.

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Learning to Pray (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Think of words and phrases that are especially meaningful and beautiful for you. It's not necessary to be original, so feel free to use poems or hymns, scripture, or phrases you've heard from a friend. Make a simple list, not trying to create a coherent statement. In the activity you'll ask for help making a prayer, using some of your gathered words and phrases. Then, invite participants to come up with their own lists. Either ask them to write a prayer of their own or work together as a group to create a prayer that is special for them at this time, on this day.

Supplies:

- marker and newsprint or whiteboard
- paper and pencils or pens

Praying is one of the most daunting, the most accessible, the most awkward actions in the practice of faith. For some, prayer is an ongoing conversation with God; for others, prayer might only be offered by those who have been trained. Some don't understand the benefits of prayer, and others see it as a superstition, or magic, or so powerful that they hesitate to use it at all. Ask how participants in your group understand prayer.

Invite the participants to find the beauty in communication with the Holy, and the blessings of opening the window on possibilities we cannot create for ourselves. Some common components of prayer are praise (a recognition of God's continuing care for us and our world), petition (requesting something from God), intercession (asking that God be present and active in someone's life), silence, emptiness, fullness, light, darkness, shadow, wonder, awe, surprise, and delight.

Ask people to describe their prayer practices. When they pray, do they do so silently or aloud? Do they stand, sit, kneel, lie down? Do they move in prayer, raising their hands to God, or use their bodies to reflect words or feelings? Do they prefer silence, or music, or a rhythmic drumbeat? What place invites prayer for them? What are other ways of praying?

Ask people to gather in a circle and hold hands or touch the shoulder of the people next to them. Beginning and ending with the leader, offer a simple prayer of one sentence, going around the circle. Those who do not wish to participate aloud may be invited to offer a moment of silence before squeezing the hand (or shoulder) of the next person to signal that they are finished. The leader finishes with "Amen" and then says, "The peace of God be with you." The group responds, "And also with you." As the group disperses, each may share the peace with one another.

8 Fashioning Beauty

Leader preparation: Experiment with fashioning objects out of modeling clay. Try simply working it through your hands as you ponder your day. How does the tactile experience of molding clay shape your thought process?

Supplies:

- modeling clay
- Bibles, in several translations if possible, with place marks at Matthew 6:24–34

Pass out modeling clay to all the participants. Ask them to create an image of something that they associate with worry or fear. Invite people to share their images if they wish and to say a few words about why they fashioned what they did.

Now read Matthew 6:24–34 twice. As people listen, they will rework the clay to form objects of beauty, peace, or release. Invite people to share these creations with one another and talk about how the scripture passage informed their work. How was the process of working with the clay beautiful?



9 Opening the Window

Leader preparation: View the art “Wind from the Sea.” To what new opportunities have you opened the windows of your life? How have they brought you beauty?

Supplies:

- artwork: “Wind from the Sea” by Andrew Wyeth, <http://www.art.com/products/p15524076-sa-i3804653/andrew-wyeth-wind-from-the-sea.htm?orig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=dfff3132492f45b38c1f69b8ff1b86c1&searchstring=wind+from+the+sea>
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projector

Display the artwork. Give everyone several moments to view it in silence. Lead a discussion based on the following questions.

- What strikes you about this painting?
- What do you notice when you look more closely?
- Where in the painting do your eyes tend to return?
- What are you curious about?
- What about the day portrayed do you find beautiful? Why?
- Ponder the open window and the breeze lifting the curtain. What new experiences do you want to welcome? How can you “lift the sash” of your life to beauty?

Reflect

What makes “new” so threatening, God? Why must we hesitate before trying, or seeing, or tasting the unfamiliar? Do we really protect ourselves, or are we hiding? Help us understand, loving Creator, that possibility is part of our lives, and that you are with us in our places of comfort and on our journeys to undiscovered delight. Thank you for sharing your world with us, for being patient while we dithered, and for loving us into new life. Amen.

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Scripture

About this Age Group

Because seekers and new church participants come both with and without an understanding of scripture, you have the opportunity to introduce and expand people's experience through the language, stories, invitations, and admonitions. It is best not to assume anything, but rather to ask what participants know, understand, have heard, assume, or guess about scripture. Asking questions for clarity is often helpful: "Help me understand what you mean by 'word of God,' please." We meet people where they are, and invite them on the journey toward a broadening of their life and faith. We cast no judgment, but rather travel together on the journey.

You may also find that longstanding members of the faith community are interested in this study. Inviting their participation will introduce visitors to members and help bridge the gap into friendship and ministry.

About this Exploration

Scripture is infused with beauty, evident in the Bible's rich images, stories, and ideas; its call to justice and right relationship with all creation; and its poetic, grace-filled language. As we interact with scripture, we discover new ways to sense the wonder, beauty, and goodness of God. We experience God's Spirit, and we are moved to worship.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Micah 6:1-8
Amos 5:18-24

Leader Preparation

You may be a lover of scripture, the Bible, its history, and its language, or you may be someone who is willing to struggle with difficult and conflicting ideas found in the text. Because scripture is understood in many different ways, you may encounter people who assume that the Bible must be taken literally in all its aspects; others will see it as a human document, or literature, or the history of God in covenant with people. Listen for assumptions garnered from family and cultures, television and the Internet, as well as from other faith communities. Prepare to be surprised by the people who have—or have not—made an effort to carefully study and investigate scripture. Expect to learn as much from the group as you teach. Model being open and you'll all discover the beauty of scripture together.

If possible, try to arrange chairs and tables so that people have a place to rest Bibles and other materials, and so that each person can see all others. This set-up may make conversation and community easier.

Prayer: God who teaches us in many ways, who delights in our discoveries and yearns for us to come close, may we hear your Word through the study of these words. May we share your delight, your love, and your yearning as we learn together. May we find you in these words, as we read and meditate, as we wonder and discover. Bless the reading and the hearing of these words. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 What Does It Mean? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Remember that the group may include people who might never have seen or opened a Bible, people who have their own Bibles and read them regularly, people who have heard that it's a holy book in which God speaks, and people who think it's just stories. Be prepared for all levels and understanding by working on your own answer to "What is the Bible for you?" Listen to the responses, ask questions to clarify answers, and be willing to hear ideas that you might not have thought about or agree with. Remind the group that there are no wrong answers. Some denominations or faith communities have very concrete beliefs about the Bible and about how to read it. Other communities invite believers and seekers to investigate, to discover, and to ask questions. Many communities offer Bible study at various times during the year. Check with church leaders to learn about educational opportunities. Remember that the focus of this resource is on the faith practice of experiencing beauty in and through scripture rather than a Bible study.

Supplies:

- Bibles, in several translations if possible, with place marks at Nehemiah 8
- definition of "Bible" from dictionary or online at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible>

Ask people to play the role of the people of Israel as you read Nehemiah 8. For example, when the text says the listeners stand, all who are able will stand. Note that many of these Israelites were hearing scripture for the first time. What about their reaction makes sense? What about it feels unusual? How did acting out the story influence the group's experience of this passage?

Ask people to describe a time when they heard something new that transformed them in some way. Have they ever had this experience with a scripture passage? What about this passage do they find moving or beautiful?

2 Navigation Lesson

Leader preparation: Write some Bible verses on newsprint or a whiteboard. The following are suggestions: Deuteronomy 11:18-19, Joshua 1:8, Psalm 27:4, Proverbs 31:30, Luke 24:27-32, Acts 17:2-3, Romans 10:11, 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, 1 Corinthians 4:8-14, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, James 2:8, 2 Peter 1:16-18.

Supplies:

- Bibles, in several translations if possible
- marker and newsprint or whiteboard

Begin with a "geography" lesson about the Bible. Guide learners to the various portions.

The Old Testament (often called the Hebrew Scriptures or the First Testament) consists of the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), the books of the history and prophets, and the Wisdom Literature, including the Psalms and Ecclesiastes.

The New Testament consists of the Gospels (the first four books in order: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), Acts (the history of the early church, focusing on

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apostles Peter and Paul), the epistles or letters to various early churches in the near East during the first century of the Common Era (CE), and Revelation, a vision by a man named John of Patmos who was writing to a church that was suffering persecution.

Show them the index of books, generally placed before Genesis, but sometimes before Matthew, giving page numbers for each book of the Bible.

Invite observations about the paper, the additional reference materials, maps, the format, and notes on the text. If participants are using their own Bibles, presentations may vary from one person’s Bible to another’s.

Explain biblical notation: name of book, chapter number, colon, verse(s). For example, Luke 9:28–36. If the entire chapter is included, verse numbers are not used: Nehemiah 8.

Start the treasure hunt, inviting participants to find various passages. If the list of verses is long, divide the verses among the group so that each person has examples from both Old and New Testaments.

Some Bibles, called study Bibles, will have a brief review of the history of each book, the author, if known, and the translation, as well as helpful footnotes at the bottom of every page.

Finish the activity with participants reading aloud one passage each found during the treasure hunt. What is important to the reader? *Was the text confusing, beautiful, enlightening, funny, touching? Did the chosen text invite more questions, or offer an answer, or open your eyes to a way of understanding, or show you the beauty of language or creation or the ways people share life together?*

③ No Words

Leader preparation: Read Luke 9:28–36. Reflect on beautiful, transformative experiences that you have had. How did you respond? The disciples had difficulty knowing how to process this event. How can you set a tone of safety and acceptance as people learn together so that they will be willing to share with one another?

Supplies:

- Bibles, in several translations if possible, place marked at Luke 9:28–36

Ask people to think of an experience they had that was so powerful and beautiful that they had difficulty knowing how to describe it. Scripture is filled with many accounts of people’s experience with the Holy.

Read Luke 9:28–36. Discuss the reaction of the disciples. *What emotions do people think they experienced? Why might Peter have wanted to build dwellings? What would it have been like to be overshadowed by a cloud? Why did the witnesses to this experience keep silent? What do you suppose eventually prompted them to share their stories?*

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 An Outcast Talks to God (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Genesis 16 in several translations if possible.

Supplies:

- Bibles, in several translations if possible, place marked at Genesis 16

Read Genesis 16. Hagar was a bound servant, which meant that she was owned by Sarai, Abraham’s wife, and that Sarai controlled Hagar’s body and mind. Sarai told Hagar what to do with every moment of her days. This story tells us that after Sarai gave Hagar to Abraham, so that a child could be born to the family, Hagar ran away. While she was running, she talked with God, and she gave God a name: El-Roi (say: el ro EE), meaning “the God who sees me.” Hagar was amazed that a mighty deity would notice a slave whose very life was structured according to the plans of other people. When El-Roi tells her to return to bondage, she obeys, and, eventually, if we continue to read Genesis, we learn that she and her son Ishmael receive a blessing similar to that of that Sarah and her son Isaac.

Invite the group to describe Hagar, her feelings, her situation, and what she does. How does her situation change? What does she discover? Is she a defenseless victim, a defiant runaway? What was she searching for in the wilderness? What did she discover? What does her story teach us? Where do you see beauty in her story? Where do we find the beauty in the story: in the discovery that God notices even the smallest, least important person, in Hagar’s gift of a name to God, in the promise of blessing that takes years and years to fulfill, in the return to a difficult life?

The stories in scripture offer us companions as we navigate our lives. *How can Hagar’s story bring us encouragement? When do we offer the gift of a name for God—when we’re joyful or when we’re frightened, when we’re lost or when we’re found? In what ways might we use Hagar’s story when we feel alone, adrift, or discarded?*

Prayer: *God, we give thanks that you see us. You know us, no matter how small we think we are. Reveal yourself to us. Amen.*



5 Birth Narratives

Leader preparation: Read the nativity stories, noticing what details are emphasized in each telling. View the art piece. How are you a seeker of beauty? Of God?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- artwork: “Journey of the Magi” by James Tissot, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1004323110?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37962&store_id=1401
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projector

Read the nativity stories from Matthew 1:18–2:23 and Luke 1:5–2:20. Talk about the details that people knew and those that are new to them.

View the artwork “Journey of the Magi.” Invite people to share their reactions. What details of the painting stand out? If people were going to place themselves

in the painting, where would they be? Why? What smells, sights, sounds, textures would they experience? How does this art connect to their understanding of the texts? The Magi were seekers, following a star to find Jesus. In what ways do people consider themselves seekers?



6 Psalm 23

Leader preparation: Find several translations of Psalm 23, including from such versions as the King James Version, New Revised Standard Version, *The Message*, the Good News Bible, New American Standard Version, and the Oxford English Version. If a musician is available, ask for help with musical accompaniment, or practice the hymns yourself. If an Internet connection is available, many recorded versions will be available on YouTube or other online music sites

Supplies:

- Bibles with place marks at Psalm 23
- “Psalm 23,” Attachment: Activity 6
- (optional) recording of 23rd Psalm by Bobby McFerrin, available on YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5WadVmFe0o>
- hymnals that contain settings of Psalm 23 (look in the hymnal’s scripture index)
- pictures that relate to Psalm 23: meadows, sheep, shepherds, lakes and ponds, hillsides and valleys, tables set for a meal, chalices and cups

Read several translations of Psalm 23, which is a well-known and beloved psalm. See Attachment: Activity 6. What images or words do people find beautiful in each translation?

Sing a hymn or two drawn from Psalm 23. Discuss the music the hymn-writer chose. How does the tune fit with the words?

After pausing in silence, invite participants to look through the pictures and posters for examples of beauty evoked by the words and music of the psalm. What other components of beauty does the psalm evoke—sounds, tastes, feelings, touch?

End with prayer, singing one of the hymn settings of the psalm, or with the group reading the psalm together aloud.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Speak, Lord, For Your Servant Is Listening (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: The story of Samuel provides a model for listening to God. It invites stories about being called and discovering beauty. Reflect on your leadership of this group. How were you called to be a leader?

Supplies:

- Bibles, in several translations if possible, with a place mark at 1 Samuel 3:1–20

Read 1 Samuel 3:1–20, perhaps asking for volunteers to read the parts of Samuel and Eli. The story of Samuel is one of the beloved accounts in the Bible. Each prophet in the Old Testament begins his or her (Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, and others) ministry with a call from God. Most argue with God, saying they are ill-equipped for the job, and recommending that God find someone more qualified. Samuel, however, on advice from Eli, his mentor, responds with the well-known words, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Ask people to finish these sentence stems:

- The things or activities that distract me from listening for God are . . .
- If I were Samuel, I might have felt . . .
- If I were Eli, I might have felt . . .
- If I thought God were speaking to someone else, I would . . .
- If I thought God were speaking to me . . .
- One way I can listen for God’s voice is . . .

8 Psalm of Praise

Leader preparation: Read Psalm 8. Think of some actions that could accompany the words. How might movement enhance the beauty and meaning of this passage?

Supplies:

- Bibles

Read Psalm 8 aloud. Ask people to note images or words that particularly strike them. Say that your group is going to set this psalm to movement! Invite people to break into pairs or small groups that will each take a section of the passage. They will devise and practice movement to enhance the words of the psalm. (If some people have restricted mobility, work to include them as much as possible.)

Gather the group together. Perform your psalm. How did movement enhance its beauty?

9 Celebrating the Bounty of God

Leader preparation: In celebration of God’s good gifts to the people of Israel, they were encouraged to feast. For this activity, we set a table of simple snacks, encouraging all to enjoy sharing food and friendship.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- snack items
- (optional) napkins
- music player
- settings of hymns or worship music
- hymn: “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>
- (optional) computer with Internet access

Say that Sukkot (the Feast of Booths) is an ancient Jewish festival of bounty and harvest described in Nehemiah 8 and still celebrated in our own time. This passage is particularly poignant here because the people have just been reunited in

the land after a period of exile. This is their first harvest, and they are instructed by Nehemiah and Ezra not to mourn their losses, but to celebrate their return and the first harvest. One of the participants may read Nehemiah 8. Ask all who listen to note the emotions of the crowd.

Ask people to identify the emotions of the Israelites as they listened to the scripture. *Why might they have wept? Why might the leaders have encouraged them to rejoice?*

After great emptiness and sacrifice, it is sometimes difficult for us to remember how to be joyful. It is easier to remain sad and quiet, and we might feel that we are not honoring that which has been lost if we laugh or dance or share a feast. This passage reminds us that sharing the blessings, being thankful for the good things, is a way back from grief to joy and gratitude to God. Notice that we are not told to forget or ignore the difficult experiences of our lives, but rather to see them in perspective: God blesses us in more ways than we notice. We get to practice discovering again the joy, the love, and the bounty of our lives.

Play “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” as a reminder of new beginnings. Play music, and share a simple meal together.

Reflect

The group may wish to look back at the Scripture Exploration as a way of experiencing beauty, and to identify the important landmarks and stories. The scriptures chosen are all fairly familiar to those who have participated in a faith community for a time, but for those who are new to the experience, some of the stories and the culture may have seemed strange. It's helpful to remember that the culture of the ancient world worked in different ways from ours, and we would probably be fairly uncomfortable if we were thrown back in time. Thousands of people not only survived but had rich, wonderful, full lives, blessed with happiness, friendship, and love. They, too, worshiped God. They, too, had frightening experiences as well as times of great joy. We don't live there or then, but we can be grateful for the stories, the songs, and the insights that come to us through the ages.

Attachment: Activity 6

Psalm 23

Contemporary English Version (CEV)

- 1 You, Lord, are my shepherd. I will never be in need.
- 2 You let me rest in fields of green grass. You lead me to streams of peaceful water,
- 3 and you refresh my life. You are true to your name, and you lead me along the right paths.
- 4 I may walk through valleys as dark as death, but I won't be afraid. You are with me, and your shepherd's rod makes me feel safe.
- 5 You treat me to a feast, while my enemies watch. You honor me as your guest, and you fill my cup until it overflows.
- 6 Your kindness and love will always be with me each day of my life, and I will live forever in your house, Lord

King James Version (KJV)

- 1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
- 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
- 3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
- 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
- 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
- 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Common English Bible (CEB)

- 1 The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing.
- 2 He lets me rest in grassy meadows; he leads me to restful waters;
- 3 he keeps me alive. He guides me in proper paths for the sake of his good name.
- 4 Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no danger because you are with me. Your rod and your staff—they protect me.
- 5 You set a table for me right in front of my enemies. You bathe my head in oil; my cup is so full it spills over!
- 6 Yes, goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the Lord's house as long as I live.

Attachment: Activity 6 (continued)

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

- 1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.
- 3 He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.
- 4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.
- 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
- 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

The Message (MSG)

1-3 God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing.
You have bedded me down in lush meadows,
you find me quiet pools to drink from.
True to your word,
you let me catch my breath
and send me in the right direction.

4 Even when the way goes through
Death Valley,
I'm not afraid
when you walk at my side.
Your trusty shepherd's crook
makes me feel secure.

5 You serve me a six-course dinner
right in front of my enemies.
You revive my drooping head;
my cup brims with blessing.

6 Your beauty and love chase after me
every day of my life.
I'm back home in the house of God
for the rest of my life.

Scripture taken from [The Message](#). Copyright©1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Age Group

A common understanding of discipleship is “following Jesus.” That term is a little vague, especially for those who have never been a part of a faith community. Seekers and new church participants, who may only know a little bit about Jesus and his ministry—or who may have had a previous negative experience in which Jesus was portrayed as threatening or condemning—get to go into more detail, to use scripture, tradition, reason, and experience to discover clues about how we might grow into the faith that Jesus modeled, the way of life that he lived. To be a disciple means we learn from Jesus. He is our mentor, teacher, guide. We’ll work through assumptions, stereotypes and cultural differences on our way. We won’t get to the end—there is no end to the journey—but we can make good friends and get to know one another and Jesus as we go.

Understanding ourselves as disciples can be daunting. After all, there are so many details, from offering our gifts (Exodus 35:20–29) to making new discoveries about our faith (Acts 9:17–20), to walking through towns, villages, hills and valleys with Jesus (the Gospels). We have the Bible and traditions of the church to guide us: the centuries and generations of thoughtful, faithful people who offer us their gifts. We also each have our own experiences that teach us what we need to know, and we can reason through many of the puzzles that we come upon day by day. Together, scripture, tradition, reason, and experience form a support network that undergirds our work and play in the realm of God.

About this Exploration

As disciples, we seek to live as Jesus lived, awake to God’s ongoing invitation to sacred relationship. This awareness helps us to discover beauty throughout our journey of discipleship, in both whole and broken places. We open ourselves to the possibility of restoration and renewal, both individually and in community. We connect with God as complete persons—with bodies, minds, hearts, and spirits. We learn to trust our physical senses as entry points into boundless worlds of beauty; they are signposts by which we discover the Holy in the ever-changing creation around and within us. As we engage the Spirit through beauty, God opens us to an entire world of sacred opportunity and pulls us gently, powerfully, toward transformation.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Exodus 35:20–29
Acts 9:17–20

Leader Preparation

Our Bible Focus Passages come not from the Gospels, as we might expect for this Exploration, but from Exodus, from the Torah that Jesus used, and from Acts, the history of the early church following Jesus’ death and resurrection. Both Old and New Testaments address discipleship and invite faithful response. Discipleship involves discerning within oneself the gifts and graces one has and then believing that one can practice those gifts as blessings offered to the community of faith and the world.

To help build community within the group, try to arrange chairs and tables in a conversation circle so that each person can see all others. Tables at or near the chairs will allow people to use Bibles and other materials during the sessions.

Prayer: God of all people, God of all places, God of quiet and noise, God of discovery and satisfaction and surprise, I offer you my work in this time and place, trusting that you are with me always. Help me hear your voice in the voices of others. Help me find your Spirit in the dark and hungry

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Bringing Our Gifts (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: If you are able, read Exodus 35. Our attention will be on the gifts we offer as our pledge to God: “Time, Talent and Treasure” or “Gifts and Graces.” The mood of the Exodus passage is joyful and collegial—everyone works together. How can we do that today?

Supplies:

- Bibles, in several translations if possible, with optional place marks at Exodus 35:20–29
- (optional) hymn: “What Gift Can We Bring” by Jane Marshall (tune: Anniversary Song), <http://www.hymnary.org/hymn/UMH/87>, or other hymns on discipleship

Notice that the list of acceptable gifts are all natural items—wools and linens from sheep and flax, minerals, or metals created from base elements; the skins of sheep and goats; spices, oils, incense (the fragrant sap of a tree). These natural materials have been shaped into useful items, but none is created by humans. Humans are invited to use their skills to craft the basic elements that God created as a gift to us. God, through Moses, also calls upon the people to bring their skills to use in creating the Tabernacle, the Ark of the Covenant, wherein will reside the tablets of the Ten Commandments. They are commanded to create a tent for the Tabernacle and all the adornments and necessary accoutrements: carrying poles, lamps, table for bread; altars for incense and offerings; furnishings for the tent; and vestments for the priests. In verse 20 all the people who had the materials or who knew how to work with the materials came with their offerings.

Think about this process. God wants to live with the Hebrew people as they journey toward the land that God will show them. God doesn’t reside, like other gods, in a tree or a mountain or a stream. God lives with the people, walking with them, living in their midst, in all their joys and sorrows, all their good and bad and laughing and whiny days. God’s place is made by God’s chosen people from materials God created or is creating: metals shaped into boxes and lamp stands; woods hewn and carved into poles and tables; fur, hair and fiber carded or scutched and spun into threads for tents, curtains, or vestments. All freely bring their gifts, knowing that God made and gave to them everything they are giving. We can hear a joyful, laughing, creative chaos take place as ideas are shared, goods piled up, spindles and looms set to work.

What is our offering to God? Is our gift to God the material goods and funds we place in the offering plate, or the creative work fashioning thoughtful, precious, beautiful, useful items, or the intention of the one who crafts and gives? God offers us constant loving presence and love. What do we give to God?

places we visit, so that we may share with others, so that our work will be blessed. In the name of Jesus, who teaches us always, 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.

Read Exodus 35:20–29, and sit quietly for a few moments, thinking about the gifts we can offer to help God make the world more beautiful. If available, sing or read the words to the hymn “What Gift Can We Bring” or another that is familiar to the group.

Go around the circle in prayer, giving thanks to God for gifts received, and offering God something in return. Be sure that people know that they may simply remain quiet if they do not wish to pray aloud. When everyone who wishes to participate has spoken, finish the prayer with everyone saying together: “These are our gifts, O God, returned to you in thanksgiving and joy.”

2 Paying Attention

Leader preparation: Ahead of time, invite participants to bring something to the session that they would be willing to offer to God. It might be an item, or their time, or a skill. Ask them to be prepared to say a few words about their offering. Alternatively, ask people to fashion something out of modeling clay that indicates a gift they offer.

As you listen, you’ll discover hidden expectations, hopes, gratitude, and dreams. In your ending prayer, give thanks not only for the offered gifts but also for the bravery and confidence shown in offering them. We sometimes compare our gifts with the gifts of God or the gifts others bring and feel ours aren’t worth anything. Wisdom is recognizing the gift as well as the giver. When we do, our giving becomes holy.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- items brought by the participants to symbolize each one’s offering
- (optional) modeling clay

Read Exodus 35:20–29. Beginning with your own offering, say a few words to the group about it. (Some gifts may not be an item or be easily symbolized. People can be encouraged to write a few words or to draw or create something that speaks to them about their gift, and they can speak briefly about it as they make their offering.)

Each gift given may be considered to be God’s, and returned to the giver to be used in a way that is meaningful for him or her. Time and skills might be offered to the faith community for volunteer work or in mission to those in need. Gifts of treasure can be placed in the offering at the next opportunity. We trust the giver to recognize that these are now sacred. The heart and mind of each giver can discern what is to be done with the gift.

3 Open Our Eyes That We May See

Leader preparation: This is a seasonal exercise in discovering beauty that takes advantage of the world outside your building. It can be particularly effective in poor weather, such as rain, sleet, or snow, or when it’s overcast and gloomy. Finding beauty on a fine, sunny day is easy. We’re after more obscure richness.

Supplies:

- Bibles, in several translations if possible, with optional place marks at Acts 9:17–20
- suitable outdoor clothing
- hymn: “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>

Sometimes it’s difficult to find beauty—or perhaps we could say sometimes it’s easy to *not* experience beauty! Invite the participants to go just outside the door, into the weather, pause one minute to meditate on the world just the way it is, and then come back to the meeting area to talk about the beauty found. Read Acts 9:17–20 before the group steps outside.

Reflect on the outdoor experience. Was the rain soft and gentle? Did the ice sketch patterns on windows? Did the overcast sky make a strong background for the shape of trees and flying birds? Do we experience crisp cold, heavy humidity? Do we hear the sounds of insects or birds, barking dogs, water trickling, or breezes through the trees? Can we feel the rain on our face or the crackling dry leaves underfoot? What does this day taste like?

Think about ways we behave and interact when the weather isn’t as fine as we prefer. How do we see our day in a more positive way? Practice finding the hidden beauty in a “bad weather” day, and talk about the ways this simple exercise can be extended into other areas of our lives. Finding and celebrating beauty in its many forms is an important part of being a faithful, loving, embracing disciple of our loving God.

Sing or read “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.” Complete the activity with a circle prayer, offering thanks for obscure, quiet, or hidden beauty.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Now I Get It! (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Discipleship means understanding and following the guidance of the Teacher. In Matthew 10:7–16, Jesus gives simple “how-to” guidance to the disciples about going out into the world, visiting and teaching, and knowing when to go home again. Prepare for the session by reading Matthew 9:35–10:40. We will focus on the central set of guiding principles. Parts of the larger passage are more complicated, and these can be addressed as people grow in faith and in understanding of the culture and century in which Jesus lived and taught. Verses 7–16 address some of the anxieties, expectations, and concerns of people going out on their own, after having been in a safe place or learning situation. Seekers and new church participants may feel that way about walking into a faith community for the first time or becoming members. Invite conversation about their concerns. You might find it helpful to have other long-term members participate in this session as well, to hear what newcomers think and to remember their own introductions into a community of faith.

Supplies:

- Bibles, in several translations if possible, with optional place marks at Matthew 10:7–16

“See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” Volunteers may read aloud two or three different translations of the passage, with meditative pauses in between. After reading, discuss what feelings are evoked by proclaiming, healing, giving. We might meet anger, fear, joy, grief, greed, or need, for example.

Divide the group by counting off by twos. Ask the partners to identify an emotion that Jesus’ disciples may have experienced as they were sent out. After time to practice, ask the pairs to act out their emotions. They will portray this emotion wordlessly while the rest of the group observes and tries to guess the emotion.

What do we learn from expressing our emotions, and how can we pay attention to the feelings of others without becoming overwhelmed? Can we always be helpful, or is listening without trying to fix or change sometimes the best option? When do we use our heads, and when do we employ our hearts in discipleship?

How do we know when to shake off the dust from our feet or when to be persistent, staying while others gradually learn to listen? How do we become comfortable with our roles as preachers, teachers, bringers of good news, healers, sharers of gifts? We are to be both wise and innocent. What does that mean? In what ways can we can Jesus’ advice right here, in our own place? How can the church community be a setting in which these words can be practiced? How can we be disciples to our families?

Sometimes experiencing emotion, either our own or someone else’s, can be overwhelming. Framing the situation can help: think of living as a disciple, of carrying love, wisdom, and strength for others. Even when we think we are inadequate, God is with us, Jesus teaches us, the Holy Spirit sustains us. Knowing that, we can be disciples, and we can help God bring beauty to the world and all that is within.

5 Fisher Folk

Leader preparation: Before the session, contact the person who maintains the calendar of prayer or prayer list for your church. Explain that the group is planning to pray for people, but you just need to know joys or concerns, not any names. Note some of the needs of the community on slips of paper.

As a group of seekers and new church participants seeking beauty in our lives and sharing beauty with others, we wish to be more aware of the concerns of God. What does God care about? How does God care for us?

Supplies:

- basket with small pieces of paper describing various situations on the community’s prayer list

Prayer is one of the mysterious practices that cannot be entirely explained. We do not have to inform God of joys or sorrows, of questions and laments; God already knows. Perhaps conversing with God in prayer helps us as well as the person or situation; perhaps by continuing to pray, we become more aware of the ways we care for one another and become equipped to be the hands and hearts that God has called to do the work.

As we become comfortable with praying, we discover that being the one who prays affects us as well as those people and situations for whom we pray. Our perspective changes, and we begin to see the world, the community, other people,

and all of nature in the light of God's love. We become more accepting, and we begin to delight in the garden of love that God creates for us. We will find beauty where we could not imagine it, and we give others the possibility of beauty simply by our new attitude. It's an adventure that never ends!

Invite the participants to pray for people without knowing their names. We don't need to know for whom we're praying. It sometimes helps to know a little about the situation, celebration, or concern, especially when if this is a new practice. In the basket are joys and concerns that some people in this faith community wanted to raise up in prayer. Have each person draw one piece of paper from the basket as it is passed around. Keep passing the basket till it's empty, and then take a few moments in silence to think about the words we use. Then offer a circle prayer, offering a few words or a single sentence: "for those who are ill", or "for the joy of new life", or "for those who are looking for a job." After each person prays, the whole group says together, "God of life, hear our prayer."

6 Embrace of Community

Leader preparation: Prepare to display "Caresse Maternelle: (Mother and Child)" by Mary Stevenson Cassatt. You may wish to order a poster or simply show the image over the Internet.

Supplies:

- artwork: "Caresse Maternelle (Mother and Child)" by Mary Stevenson Cassatt, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1004323110?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37961&store_id=1401
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capability

Display the artwork "Caresse Maternelle (Mother and Child)." Invite people to view it in silence for a few moments.

Lead a discussion that focuses on the following questions:

- What did you first notice about this print?
- Where do your eyes want to linger? Why?
- If you were in this room, what sounds do you think you would hear?
- What does the setting appear to be?
- What mood does the painting convey to you?

Ask the group to ponder the painting in light of the theme of discipleship and beauty. Have people recall times when they have felt supported by another person. What made that experience beautiful? When have people felt embraced by a community? Have they experienced welcome from a faith community? What would it be like to feel as comfortable with a faith community as the child in the painting does with the mother?

Prayer: God, you know us completely and accept us as we are. Show us how to be an extension of your grace to one another. Amen.

Sending & Serving Activities

7 Here Is the Church, We Are the People (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This activity invites seekers and new church participants to share their insights on this particular church community. Rather than make any suggestions yourself, allow them to offer their own observations. Building community includes listening to others, sharing together, seeking ways through the forest of ideas and personalities. It also takes patience and a willingness to wait through the process of change! Assure the group that we are looking for positive observations, but also critiques—places or times when we still need to work on being the church together. Encourage participants who have helpful ideas to share them with church leaders.

Supplies:

- Bibles, in several translations if possible, with optional place marks at 2 Corinthians 8:1–7

Today we raise up the strengths of being community, of working together and struggling with one another to be the community of Christ in the world. Read two or three translations of 2 Corinthians 8:1–7.

Take a walk together through your meeting place, whether it’s a single room or a whole series of buildings. Pause in doorways, hallways, and stairways to talk about moving through the life of church together. In each place, pause and ask if someone has a story or memory about this spot. Listen, and offer a simple prayer of thanks for the beauties of community living together: *Gracious God, your blessings come to us as we move through your world, and we thank you. Amen.*

If there is time after the walk, share ideas about the ways this church is faithful. What lessons are being learned now? How can we help, teach, support, and encourage our own community?

End with prayer for people working to be faithful: for dedication to the task, for listening to all aspects of the issue, and for finding ways of being the church together.

God of pathways and highways, of crooked streets and steep hills, of deep valleys and quiet walks, you invite us to hear your story as we move through your world. May we continue to listen,. May we hear your voice in the voices of others, and may we be your faithful, loving people in this place and in all the times of our lives. Amen.

8 Breakfast on the Beach

Leader preparation: Become familiar with the whole story told in John 21, so that you can tell it in your own words (or those in “activity description”). Be a storyteller! See it as a tale to be told to friends; invite people to see themselves in it. Perhaps you recognize yourself in one of the characters; say so. Invite others to tell the story as they hear it. When all who wish to have told their story, sing or read the hymn together, and offer thanks for laughter, for Jesus who gives us helpful suggestions on how to get where we’re going, for storytellers who save the most important parts of our history in ways we can remember easily.

Supplies:

- Bibles, in several translations if possible, with optional place marks at John 21

Sometimes, when we don't know what to do, when all our ideas have failed, we kick the sand for a while, and skip rocks, and mumble around wondering what to do. Then a bright idea comes along: "I know! I'll do what I know how to do!" That's what the disciples did after Jesus died and was resurrected. They didn't know what to do, so they decided to go fishing. They didn't have to learn how to do it; they just needed a net and a boat. They spent all night casting a net, wearing grooves in the side of the boat as they hauled up another empty net until, when the dawn broke, they were hot, tired, sweaty, discouraged, clammy, and grumpy, just as we are when we keep trying the same old thing and getting the same old result. Somebody who hasn't been a part of our work makes a suggestion that we probably don't take very well, but the only way to get rid of the commentator is to give it a try, so we do—knowing it won't work. But it does, for goodness' sake, and then we look, really look, at who made the suggestion. There's Jesus, waving to us from the beach, with a fire and breakfast waiting. "Oh, yeah," we think, "Jesus. The one who knows us best, who taught us so well, the one we felt lost without."

Peter, being Peter, puts on his clothes and jumps into the water, eager to be with Jesus and forgetting about his friends who are working so hard to bring in a huge, heavy, loaded, drippy net full of fish. Jesus reminds him to turn around and help. When the hard work is done, a good, hot, filling meal is shared. *Did they laugh together? Did they talk about what they'd done since that frightening, awful Friday when Jesus died? What do you suppose they talked about?*

After breakfast, Jesus and Peter went for a walk up the beach. Perhaps Jesus saw that Peter still felt badly about denying him. Perhaps Peter wanted to explain himself, or to apologize, or to assure himself that Jesus still wanted to be with him. Jesus asked Peter three questions, and each time Peter said, "Yes." Jesus gave Peter a huge job: to shepherd the early church through its first difficult years, to care for the people and to feed them spiritually (and maybe even cook breakfast on the beach for a new group of wanderers). Peter accepted eagerly, knowing that Jesus would not give this responsibility to someone he didn't trust.

Peter had one more thing on his mind, and we recognize it, because we do it, too: "What about that person? What about those other people who aren't doing it my way? What about them?" Jesus told Peter not to worry. There are lots of ways to be faithful, and many people to help with the work. Don't worry. Fear not. Angels were always telling people not to fear. And Jesus tells us today: "Fear not. Don't worry. I'm here, you're here, and together, we'll do just fine."

Invite participants to reflect on the story from their point of view. What part of the story speaks to them? Invite them to ask themselves: Am I a Peter, or an Andrew? Do I keep my nose to the grindstone, never looking up, just intent on finishing the job? Am I impetuous, jumping in with both feet, eager to experience an adventure? Do I offer hospitality to my friends when they've been working hard? Can I laugh at myself, accept myself, and promise to pay closer attention next time? Do I see myself as having new possibility, as I learn from my experiences and as I see others demonstrating different ways of being faithful? How is experiencing beauty a part of my discipleship practice?

9 Images of Discipleship

Leader preparation: Look up stained-glass images of the disciples. If you search the Internet with the words “disciple stained glass,” you will find several options. (One suggestion is: <http://www.dreamstime.com>.) What strikes you about these portrayals? Do you relate to the disciples as they are portrayed? What beauty do you observe?

Supplies:

- stained-glass images of the disciples
- newsprint
- pastels, colored pencils, pencils, crayons
- computer with Internet access and projection capability

Show the stained-glass images of the disciples. Ask people to comment on these portrayals. What stands out? Do people find these images easy to relate to? What beauty do people observe?

Invite discussion about what a stained-glass image of modern disciples looks like. Ask people to work in small groups or as a large group to craft such an image. What setting will they choose? Why?

Take time to admire the finished work and enjoy one another’s perspectives of discipleship.

Reflect

As you think back over this session, who in the group was quiet, and who spoke out the most? In what ways did you create a comfortable space for each person to offer an opinion or ask a question? What new idea of the beauty of discipleship did you gain from leading this session?

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Age Group

Traditions are those practices that become meaningful over time, that carry the stories of their origins and help us remember. Each of the seekers and new church participants has traditions that are important, but they may not be familiar with the universal traditions of the Christian faith: communion, also known as the Eucharist, baptism, the liturgical calendar, the rituals surrounding marriage and mourning, ordination, and others. Local and cultural practices will inform the ways traditions are practiced, but the essentials are common throughout the world, telling the story to those who have heard it hundreds of times as well as to those who are learning today.

About this Exploration

For centuries followers of Christian tradition have sought ways to connect with God. Layers of song, prayers, spoken word, and silent searching have characterized the heart of the community of faith in its longing for this connection. The ways we worship and live out our daily lives reflect these traditions, sometimes without our even knowing it. At times, traditions are left behind for generations and then rediscovered in new, relevant, and powerful ways. This exploration seeks to examine, appreciate, and perhaps revive some of our traditions, and thereby bless and empower a faith that is rooted in today's world and experience.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Psalm 8
John 12:1-8

Leader Preparation

Traditions come in two flavors: Big T and little t. Big T traditions are those that are recognized by all or most of the churches regardless of denominational differences. Communion, called Eucharist by some, is a Big T tradition. So is baptism. Patterns of worship, such as the sequence of praise, confession, forgiveness, hearing the Word, and going forth into the world, are little t traditions. These traditions are not understood to be those practices we must do or observe, but rather those that give richness and meaning to our words and actions. Many traditions have been practiced for generations and centuries in the life of the church.

Prayer: Thank you, welcoming God of surprises and stories, for calling us to take the time to live within the rich traditions of our faith. We sometimes go through the motions without understanding. With this study may we come to appreciate the people and cultures who have contributed these ways of telling your story, and may we find the beauty of the ages in our time together. In the name of your Son, who taught us to treasure both the old and the new, we pray. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 What Day Is It? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Use several Bible translations in order to compare the ways in which various traditions and ages have interpreted the ancient texts. Often the variations in word choices will help us appreciate the richness of the language and the message. Consider the tradition of keeping the Sabbath set apart as a sacred day, and the modern tradition of Sunday as another weekend day. Prepare to invite conversation around the question of how we can understand and keep a day holy.

Supplies

- Bibles, in several translations if possible, with optional place marks at Genesis 2:2-3 and Psalm 8
- paper
- colored pencils, crayons, or markers

Invite people to read Genesis 2:2-3 and Psalm 8. In response ask participants to think about a typical week in their lives. What days and times are set aside? What makes those reserved times important? Is a Sabbath time set aside each week, even if the traditional Saturday or Sunday is not possible?

Invite discussion about how people find Sabbath rest. Can we take a walk through the woods or the neighborhood? Could we weed, prune, and harvest in the community garden? Might we gather friends and family together for a day of sharing food and fun?

Each person may draw a picture of a typical week, using different colors for various categories: family time, work, play and pleasure, worship, volunteering, study. Is the week balanced between God, work, family, and self? Using another color or another sheet of paper, make a more balanced week, remembering that our lives express beauty when we offer God a portion of our time, as well as when we balance work, play, family, friends, and self-care.

2 Washing

Leader preparation: Speak with the minister about baptism traditions in this community. If time allows, invite the group to enter the sanctuary and examine the baptismal font or baptistry.

Supplies:

- bowl of water
- (optional) hymn: "I was There to Hear Your Borne Cry" by John Ylvisaker (tune: Waterlife), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6x9OhN5Qnbl&feature=related>; lyrics: <http://www.hymnlyrics.org/requests/i-was-there-to-hear-your-borne-cry.php>

Baptism is one of the sacraments (sacred rituals) of the Christian community. It comes from the ancient Jewish tradition of bathing before worship. Each of the four Gospels tells of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan. The ministry of John the Baptist, as well as of the Apostle Paul and the other disciples, included baptism as an important component of their various missions. It is one of the most ancient of our traditions. Because it is so old, and has been used over the ages in so many diverse communities and cultures, there are many variations. The consistent fac-

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.

tor is the use of water. Almost every other part of the ritual varies. Some communities welcome families who bring infants for baptism and make promises on their behalf; some churches encourage people to wait until the individual begins to understand the implications of the commitments being made (believer’s baptism). Some faith communities use a few drops of water as a symbol of cleansing from the sin of the person’s former life. Other communities have a baptismal pool that is deep enough for the baptismal candidate to be immersed completely. Most churches believe that baptism needs to happen only once in a person’s life.

Discuss the practices of baptism in your faith community and the connections people have with baptism. Invite participants to tell stories about baptism, either their own, one they attended, or one they heard about. *What does baptism mean for you? What do you find beautiful about this practice? To whom would you be willing to tell your baptism story? If you have children or nieces and nephews, how would you tell them your personal baptism story? If your parents were baptized, do you know the story of their baptism? If not, can you ask them?*

Invite the group to stand in a circle around a table on which the bowl of water has been placed. If possible, ask people to sing “I Was There to Hear Your Borne Cry,” or another baptism hymn from your hymnal. As everyone sings, those who wish to may dip their fingers in the water either as a remembrance of baptism or in gratitude for God’s grace.



3 Delighting the Eye

Leader preparation: Color is one way we tell our story to ourselves. Check with your worship leaders or minister to see in what ways your congregation deliberately uses color. Ask if the group might look through the storage closet that contains the paraments, stoles, and banners. If you have time, take a look before the session begins, so you can tailor your conversation to this particular faith community. If the minister has stoles, ask if you might borrow them or if the minister would like to come to the session to talk about them.

Supplies:

- “The Liturgical Calendar,” Attachment: Activity 3
- paraments used within the church community (You may wish to leave them in storage and take the group to see them if possible.)
- stoles from the ministers’ collections, if available
- fabric or paint color swatches if no paraments or stoles are available
- paper
- (optional) colored pencils or markers

The story of faith is told in song, story, and color. Each season of the year uses a color that helps tell the story. The sanctuary is adorned with these colors to help the congregation find beauty, understand the story, and remember the season we are experiencing.

For much of the history of Christianity, only a small minority of the faithful were able to read. If the community had a Bible—and many did not—it was not in the language of the people, but rather in Latin or Greek or Hebrew. The history of the church, the names and adventures of the faithful of other generations, the ancient tales of the Old and New Testaments were told in story, in mosaic or stained glass (when there were buildings constructed deliberately as sanctuaries, or in the banners and stoles and paraments (altar or communion table coverings) of the season. We continue the tradition of visual narrative today. There are no strict rules about what colors to use. Indeed traditions around the use of color change over the centuries.

Display the Attachment: Activity 3, “The Liturgical Calendar,” that illustrates the church seasons and colors. The most recent liturgical colors are red, white, violet or purple, and green.

- Red symbolizes blood, life, and the Holy Spirit. Traditionally red is used for Palm/Passion Sunday, Pentecost, and other days when we are focusing on the movement of the Holy Spirit among us.
- White indicates purity, and is displayed at Christmas and Easter, as well as for weddings and funerals or memorial services. Gold is a variant of white, symbolizing the richness of the faithful life.
- Violet, purple, or black is the color of repentance and mourning, and is used for Lent and Advent. Sometimes, local tradition or family tradition prefers this color choice for funerals or memorial services. The modern Advent color is a clear bright blue, such as one sees on paintings of Mary’s robe.
- Green is displayed during the Ordinary Days, and is often associated with new life.

Sometimes, paraments and banners are gifts to the church from families who wish to honor one of their members. Paraments, stoles, and banners are often made by members of the congregation, by church needlework, sewing, embroidery, or quilting groups using traditional Christian patterns developed over the centuries, or telling the story of this particular community in fabric and fiber images.

Invite the participants to look at the ways this church uses color. As you move around the sanctuary, take note of the colors in the room: floor, walls, windows, communion table or altar, pews, choir chairs, worship leaders’ chairs. Experience beauty. Celebrate the gifts of color, texture, and shape in telling the story of faith. *How do these traditional colors help you experience beauty as you worship?*

Tour the sanctuary to see which colors are teaching the community now. Which colors are permanent (floor and wall coverings, furniture), and which are changed with the liturgical seasons? Return to your meeting room. Talk about what liturgical seasons you are most familiar with. *What are your favorites? Why?*

Option: If your faith community does not use banners and paraments, or does not have a sanctuary, use paper and colored pencils or markers to create some suggested visual lessons for communion Sundays, baptism, Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Awe and Wonder: Singing Our Faith (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Most people are willing to sing hymns with others, even those who “can’t carry a tune in a basket.” If possible, invite your church musician to participate in a hymn sing, using the hymnal of the church. If an accompanist is not available, perhaps finding some audio recordings online will encourage participants to choose hymns and tell their stories. If your church doesn’t use hymnals, consider inviting participants to bring with them the words (and music) to their favorite hymns.

Supplies:

- Bibles, in several translations if possible, with optional place marks at the Psalms
- hymnals

Every faith community has ways of singing and has favorite hymns. Many have hymnals in the pews, although some churches sing from memory or project words onto a screen or wall. The methods are not as important as the fact that we sing our faith. Invite participants to look through the hymnal and identify hymns they know. If a musician or recorded versions are available, have a hymn sing.

Cover the seasons of the church year from the anticipation of Advent through Christmastide to Lent, Easter, and Pentecost, using the topical and scriptural indices at the back of the hymnal. Most people will know Christmas hymns; use that as a starter. Tell stories about hymns that evoke special memories or feelings. Remember, hymns aren't always sung in church. Families sing hymns on special occasions, and often a particularly joyful or sad event will encourage singing, when nothing else will satisfactorily express what we are feeling. Invite group members to name favorite hymns. Sing a verse or two of the hymns, or read them as prayer/poems. After each hymn, ask people to name some words or musical elements they find beautiful.



5 Covenant Promises

Leader preparation: Locate the print “Guatemala: Procession” by Betty LaDuke. You may want to find this image online. Also locate information about and images of the *alfrombas* or carpets that some faith communities place on streets. One website is http://www.questconnect.org/guat_alfombra_photo.htm.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Guatemala: Procession” by Betty LaDuke, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1004323110?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15626&store_id=1401
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projection capability

Display “Guatemala: Procession” by Betty LaDuke. Ask the group to respond to the following prompts:

- What first caught my eye was . . .
- I’m curious about . . .
- I wonder why the artist . . .
- If I could be anywhere in this print, I would choose . . .
- One aspect of this image I find beautiful is . . .

Point out that some faith communities participate in processions as an expression of their faith. A common time for procession is on Palm Sunday, when people walk around and wave palm branches. In some churches, the choir and worship leaders process at the beginning of the service. Show pictures of the elaborate *alfrombas* that believers lay down on streets. What do people think of this practice? The carpets eventually disappear as people walk over them. Why would such a tradition continue to be practiced? How can we be alert to beauty that is fleeting? What lasting beauty can the practice of traditions provide?



6 O Taste and See the Goodness of the Lord

Leader preparation: Learn about the procedure for communion preparation in your congregation. Do you use bread, matzo, communion wafers, or fresh baked bread? Do you use wine, grape juice, or both? Does the community use a common cup or tiny individual cups? What accommodations are made for those who are gluten intolerant or have other food sensitivities? Who is invited to prepare the elements? Is this a privilege or a duty? Why does your church use the type of elements it does? What is the tradition behind that choice?

If you like, invite the minister or worship leader to attend the session to teach about communion and to answer questions from the group. If time permits, ask your minister if communion might be shared during the session. If so, obtain elements (bread and wine or juice) and use these to demonstrate the process of preparation for the group.

This is a very involved activity. You will need to determine how much information, how much activity, and which components you have time to use.

Supplies:

- Bibles, in several translations if possible, with optional place marks at Isaiah 6:1–8, Matthew 26:26–30, Mark 14:22–26, Luke 22:14–23, and John 6:1–15
- communion set
- “Some Thoughts about Communion,” Attachment: Activity 6
- pens or pencils

Display a communion set. Distribute the handout. Refer to or read the scripture texts noted above.

Describe how communion is practiced in your setting. Who offers the blessing prayers for bread and cup in your church? Who invites the community to partake of the feast? Are children welcome to receive communion, or do children receive a blessing until they have been baptized or confirmed? Are nonmembers welcome at the table, or does this community practice “closed” or “close” communion? Why or why not? Does the congregation come forward to receive communion, or are they served in the pews by ministers, deacons, or ushers? Do communicants take the bread and cup and wait until everyone is served as a gesture of community? Does each communicant consume the bread and “fruit of the vine” (wine or juice) as he or she receives it, as a gesture of the individual’s relationship with Jesus?

Invite people to ask questions or make comments on the information about communion. They may wish to jot notes on the handout that indicate what they find beautiful about the practice or what questions still remain.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Talking with God (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Be aware that some people are quite nervous about speaking in public, even to share a simple prayer. Assure all that God knows our prayers even when we can’t voice them aloud.

Daily prayer is an important part of a healthy spiritual life, but many people don't feel they have the time or the skill to speak with God. Some are more comfortable asking others to pray for them than to pray themselves. Some aren't sure prayer works. Indeed, the benefits of prayer might be partially named, but we cannot comprehend all. We pray because we believe that God is with us and that God pays attention and cares. As with any beloved friend, we maintain the lines of communication as well as possible, making an effort to find out what's going on in his or her life, and telling our stories as well.

Supplies:

- Bibles, in several translations if possible, with optional place marks at Psalm 8, Psalm 137:1–6, Matthew 6:7–13, and Luke 11:1–13

People have been talking to God for centuries. When we read the stories in the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament), we learn that people meet God wherever they are, in the middle of problems and in the midst of joy. Abraham argues and bargains with God; Moses tries to send God away to find someone else to lead the people out of bondage; Isaiah protests that he is not good enough; the psalms are used both for praise and to lament. God hears all our words. Even in those times when we can't find words to express what we feel, God understands.

Discuss prayer practices. Do people think of prayer as spontaneous, deliberate, or avoided? How do people feel about praying? How do we talk with God? How do we pray? What words or attitudes are appropriate? Is it okay to ask for healing, or for God to interrupt a tragedy, or for God to take us out of a difficult situation?

What kinds of prayers do we offer? We can say together formal prayers that we find in prayer books or the Bible. One of the most common traditional prayers is the Prayer of Jesus (also called the Lord's Prayer.) Another is the Jesus prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." We can say, "Great roses, God. Thanks!" and that's a prayer. We might say, "I don't like this, and I don't know what to do next," and that's a prayer. Writer Anne Lamott says there are only two prayers we need to remember: "Help, help, help" and "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

Invite people to share. What "thank you" prayers have people prayed lately? What "help" prayers? In what ways is praying like beautiful conversation?



⑧ The Other Calendar

Leader preparation: Seekers and new church participants may not know anything about the liturgical seasons of the church year, but then, many people in the pews don't, either, aside from Christmas and Easter. The activities in this Exploration might be shared as open sessions with longstanding members of the community who wish to know more about when we celebrate, meditate, remember, and tell the stories of our faith. Opening the group meetings to every interested person not only will increase the knowledge base of the community, but also has the potential to begin friendships and find common ground.

As we move through the liturgical seasons of the church year, invite comments from the group about their own practices during these seasons. Create a conversation rather than giving a lecture. Invite stories that help make each season meaningful to participants. A helpful book to have in your hand, and in the church library, is *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church*, by Laurence Hull Stookey (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

Supplies:

- calendar for the current year
- (optional) calendar marking the current liturgical seasons
- “The Other Calendar,” Attachment: Activity 8

Begin by asking people to say words they think of when they hear the word “calendar.” We depend on and often appreciate calendars; sometimes we resent their restrictions and reminders of our busy-ness. Most people carry a calendar with them either on their watch, phone, or other electronic device, or a hard copy in their purse or wallet.

The Christian church also uses a calendar, but it doesn’t hang on a wall in the kitchen. It, too, keeps track of birthdays and anniversaries; it reminds us of the holy moments and opportunities to participate in faith practices. Sometimes we’re surprised by what’s coming up next when our lives are busy and we’re focused on our secular calendar. But the liturgical calendar helps us remember our story of faith, or worship. Using this calendar of faith, we can tell the story to others and remain faithful in our own lives. By understanding the seasons of the church year, we can live both today and in the grand scope of history and future.

Distribute the handout. Walk the group through the sequence of seasons. After each main section, invite people to share what they find beautiful about that church season.

9 The Priesthood of All People

Leader preparation: If the minister is available, invite him or her to attend the session to talk about the experience of being called. When you were invited to lead this Seekers’ group, did you feel a sense of excitement and purpose? Did you feel called? Tell your story. Invite participants to share experiences of feeling called to do something significant in their lives. Read the story of Samuel’s call in 1 Samuel 3.

Supplies:

- Bibles, in several translations if possible, with optional place marks at 1 Samuel 3 and John 12:1–8.
- slips of paper, each with the name of one of the participants.

Through the ages God has called certain people to ministry. Some are called to lead a church, others to serve as chaplains, artists, musicians, or administrators specializing in church or denominational leadership. Following a course of several years of study and prayer, the candidate may be ordained, in accordance with the rules of the denomination. The Service of Ordination is an ancient rite of the church that gathers clergy, friends, family, and the congregation together to celebrate Christ’s gift of ministry to the church. Hymns and prayers are offered for the community and for the ordinand. Promises are made to be faithful to God, and to the community. The laying on of hands is the center of the rite; the practice will vary according to denominational standards. In some communities, clergy come forward to lay hands upon the kneeling ordinand; in others, the whole community comes forward, laying hands upon the ordinand or upon those closer, so that the blessing of God flows through the whole gathered body of Christ.

There’s sometimes an element of surprise that a particular person might be called by God. In John 12:1–8: the woman who anointed Jesus was laying hands on him, as Jesus said, in preparation for his death. The watchers were indignant not only because women didn’t touch men in that culture, but because her loving act wasn’t part of their plan for the evening. Samuel didn’t expect God to call him,

either. After all, he was a child, the temple broom-handler, the lowest rung on the ladder. He was not the priest of God. Didn't God know the proper way to do this? God should have been talking to Eli!

How might we know how God is calling us? How does God call teachers and electricians and woodworkers and weavers and farmers and landscapers? Does God call physicians and nurses? Parents? How about florists? People who respond to God's call can expect some surprise, some questioning about their qualifications. *Might God call you?* If we assure you that God doesn't call the equipped, but that God equips the called, would you be able to imagine yourself called by God to help make the world a more beautiful place? *What might you do to answer your call?*

Give each person the name of one of the other participants, asking recipients not to reveal the name received. After people have closed their eyes, walk around the room, tapping a person on the shoulder. That person calls out the name on his or her slip of paper. The person whose name is called tries to identify the caller. How well do they know the other participants' voices?

Reflect

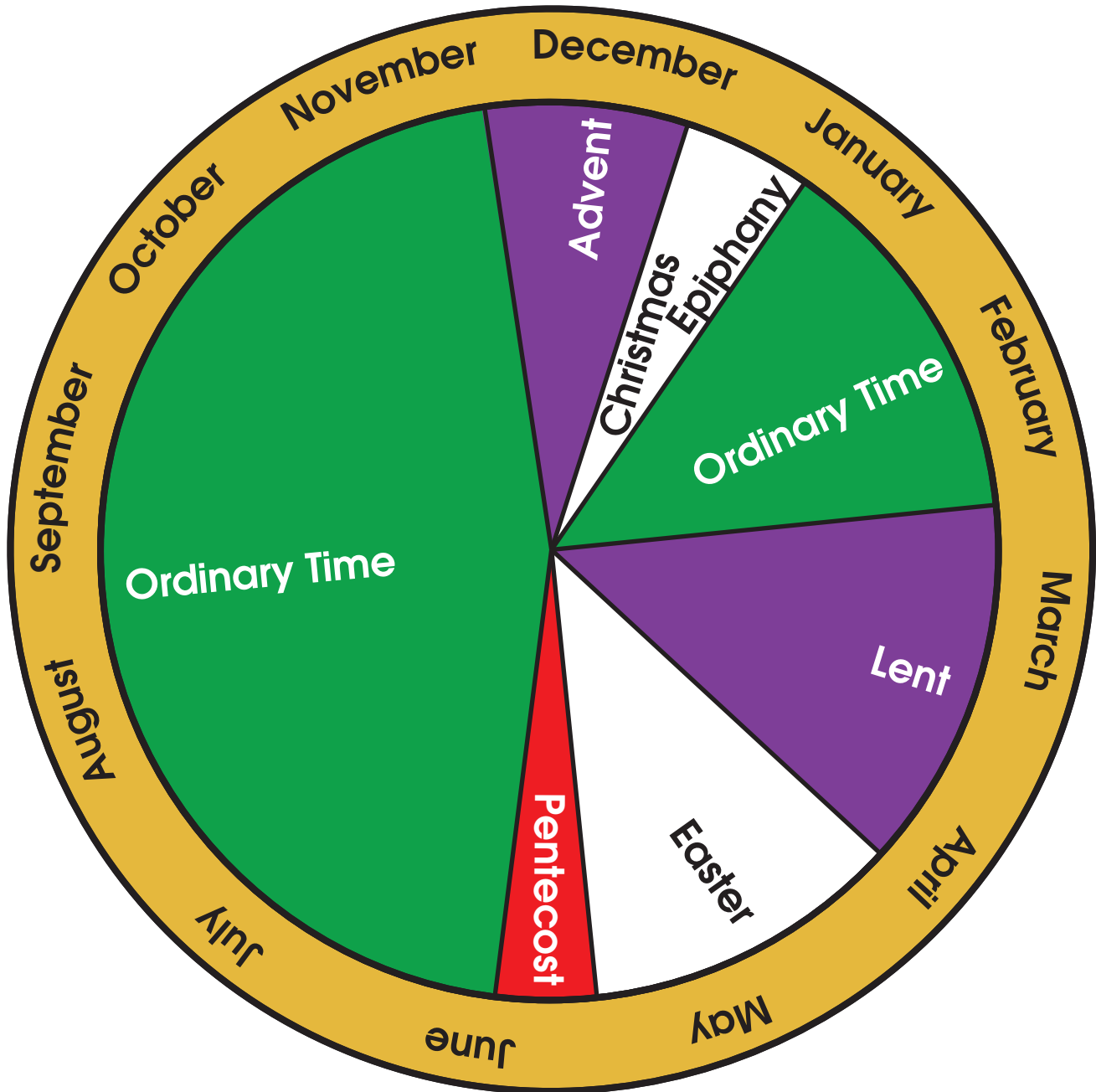
Traditions form over time. As generations come and go, traditions change, become more important, or fade away. As the world changes, so do we, and so do our ways of being faithful. We would not recognize some of the language, gestures, or expectations of behavior from 1500 years ago, yet at the core, we find vital elements that do not change over time: God, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit. Differences in the ways denominations or families or cultures practice being faithful are simply differences, not incorrectness. By observing, listening, and participating in other people's traditions, we find more facets of truth and beauty. An open mind invites beauty to enter, and beauty expands our life of faith beyond anything we can imagine.

God, as we come before you, as we explore and discover and are amazed by the abundance set before us, may we always find you at the heart of our search, gracious God of all wanderers, of all who wonder, of all who seek. May our response be "Yes", and may our hands and feet follow our hearts to you who offer the ultimate "Yes" to all. As Jesus prayed, so do we pray: in praise, in supplication, in confidence. Amen.

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Attachment: Activity 3

The Liturgical Calendar



Attachment: Activity 6

Some Thoughts about Communion

The service of communion (in some traditions called Eucharist) is, at heart, a remembrance of Jesus' meals with the disciples and followers. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the Gospels tell us of the Last Supper. John's shared meal is the feeding of the five thousand! Each story gives us insight into our own ministry and worship. Invite group members to read the selected scriptures.

Important components of the worship service are praise and adoration, contrition, confession, forgiveness, and absolution, hearing God's word and responding, and finally a commissioning or sending forth. The pattern is modeled on Isaiah's vision in Isaiah 6:1–8. By using acts and words common through the ages, we affirm that we share equally with the saints and members of the household of God, past, present, and future. In the early church, those who had not yet been baptized were dismissed before communion; this is why communion is often offered late in the service of worship, even though many traditions now have different rituals for receiving bread and cup.

The communion invitation and call to supper: The invitation and call to the supper demonstrate that all people of faith are welcome. We celebrate not just the memory of Jesus' meal, but also our participation with him in a meal served to all people, the heavenly banquet. In our community prayers, we tell again the story of God's generous work in the world. Often the whole community participates in saying or singing these prayers, ending with the Prayer of Our Savior (the Lord's Prayer).

The breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cup: The bread is broken and the cup is poured to remind us of two understandings. One is that grain gathered to make a single loaf and grapes pressed to make a single cup symbolize the oneness of all believers in the body of Christ, the church. The second is that Jesus offered and poured out his life as a model for the discipleship we are all called to practice. Each community has its own traditions for sharing and receiving bread and cup. What are your expectations? What are you used to doing, and what does it symbolize for you? Do you find beauty in other ways of receiving communion?

Thanksgiving and blessing: The thanksgiving prayer affirms our willingness to serve God. In many communities, this prayer is offered by the whole community. The conclusion often includes the Song of Simeon and a commissioning or blessing. We move from the meal to the mission, from being fortified and fed to going out into the world as disciples.

Attachment: Activity 8

The Other Calendar

Advent

Advent marks the beginning of the church year. In the four weeks leading up to Christmas, we prepare for the coming of the infant who will change the world. Often the scripture lessons and hymns are anticipatory, looking forward to a time of joy, inviting God to be among us. We prepare ourselves, so that we're ready for the birth. The traditional color for the sanctuary is purple; the modern color is a soft bright blue (think of the color of Mary's robe in paintings).

- What does this faith community do to keep the season of Advent?
- What other Advent practices do you know about (Advent calendars, Advent candles and wreaths, seasonal music, and so forth)?

Christmas

Christmas is the season of twelve days that begins at sunset on December 24 and continues through January 6. There are two Sundays of Christmas, simply numbered "the first Sunday of Christmas" and "the second Sunday of Christmas." The season of Christmas celebrates the meeting of the Divine with humanity, when we meet God. Many churches tell the stories of the shepherds (Luke) and the Magi (Matthew) also meeting God during this time. Also during this season, we hear the story of Jesus' baptism (Mark and John).

- How does this church tell the story during the season of Christmas?

Lent

The season of Lent is the forty days, not counting Sundays, leading up to Easter. During this time, Christians examine their own lives in light of God's love and the ministry of Jesus. The liturgical color is black or purple, the colors of penitence and mourning. Many churches offer special study or prayer opportunities during Lent, following the example of the Gospels, in which a major portion of Jesus' teaching and healing takes place in the period before he goes to Jerusalem from Galilee.

- Is the season of Lent an important educational or spiritual time for your community?
- What might you do during Lent to tell its story?

During the last week of Lent, beginning with Palm/Passion Sunday, we walk with Jesus during his last week, from his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, through his preaching and teaching in Jerusalem, especially in the Temple, through his last supper with his followers, his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Palm branches are often given to the congregation on Palm/Passion Sunday, as the story is told throughout worship, from the joyful entry to the quieter, darker days of the Passion. Palm/Passion colors are purple or red.

- How does this community recognize Palm/Passion Sunday? If participants have attended other churches, they may be able to share stories and memories from those communities of Palm/Passion celebrations that were meaningful or helpful for them.

Attachment: Activity 8 (continued)

- Who receives palms in your church?
- Do the children hear the story during the children's sermon?
- Do you continue the story on this Sunday, or do you gather to tell the story throughout the week?

On Maundy Thursday, the day before Good Friday, a service of Tenebrae (shadows) is often offered after sunset, telling the story of the last supper with scripture readings and hymns; as each portion is complete, a candle is snuffed and the sanctuary darkens. Communion (Eucharist) is a significant portion of this service. The color for Maundy Thursday is white.

Some, but not all, Protestant churches gather for somber Good Friday observances, which vary from place to place. The color for Good Friday is black or purple, or none. The focus is on the crucifixion. Often, during or following this worship, the sanctuary is stripped of all ornamentation, including banners, candles, Bible, and any portable decoration. A cross might be draped in black fabric.

Holy Saturday (when some churches gather for worship) is a day of silence and emptiness: Jesus has been laid in the tomb, and the resurrection has not yet happened. The color is black or none.

Easter

On Easter morning, the cross is draped in white, the sanctuary is filled with light, and music once more fills the sanctuary. The mood is joyful and wondering, full of surprise and delight. The color is white.

Easter, in addition to being a Sunday, is also a season of fifty days. The color continues to be white. During this time, we try to grasp the mystery of resurrection and ascension. The first followers of Jesus struggled with this, too, and this season marks the time they spend mourning, wondering, asking questions, occasionally glimpsing Jesus, and coming to terms with a new reality.

- What happens after Easter Sunday in your faith community?

Pentecost

Pentecost celebrates the birth of the church, which is recorded in the first chapters of Acts. The color is red, which signifies life and is traditionally the color of the Holy Spirit.

- In what ways does your church celebrate Pentecost?

Ordinary Time

Ordinary Time follows Pentecost and lasts until Advent. Ordinary Time counts all the Sundays of the year. The word "ordinary" comes from "ordinal", meaning number. The Ordinary Sundays appear following Epiphany, the last day of Christmas and going up Ash Wednesday, and the majority of the Sundays between Pentecost and Advent. The color is green.

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Age Group

Because seekers and new church participants are entering already established communities, they may feel hesitant about fitting into ongoing mission initiatives or about seeming to be intrusive by trying to begin a new mission. One struggle will be with longstanding members who “already know how to do it” and with new participants who have been active in other communities using other methods. Anxiety may be present, so remind everyone that no mission is perfect, that new ideas are often very helpful, and that our work is done carefully to ensure that ministry is practiced in a loving, caring, grace-filled manner. Invite each group to listen to the other and to try different ways of being the hands of God to others. Ongoing review will often be helpful, with changes great and small taking place over time as the needs and workers change.

About this Exploration

The beauty that surrounds us—in our relationships as well as the gifts of creation—points us to God. When we actively engage with our faith, we open ourselves to seeing beauty everywhere, in an ever-widening context. As we awaken to a new appreciation for the Divine, we are better equipped to reflect beauty ourselves and join with others to experience the grace and glory of God.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Ecclesiastes 3:1–13
2 Corinthians 5:16–20

Leader Preparation

Seekers and new church participants may not feel they have enough experience to engage in mission or ministry. Using the Discipleship Exploration first may give some background and encouragement. “Mission” is often assumed to be large and complicated, when it can be as simple as visiting a friend, volunteering for a clean-up day in a park, or serving meals to the hungry. Help participants understand that making the world beautiful and discovering beauty often involves a single act on a single day for a single person.

Use the artwork of Andrew Wyeth’s “Wind from the Sea” to help imaginations begin to flow with ideas. At first glance, the room, window, and curtain appear to be in need of a little soap and water, or perhaps a needle and thread, and maybe some paint. But sometimes “old” and “worn” are the containers for rich and important stories or memories. What does this painting tell or ask you?

Prayer: God of welcome and surprises, our world is full of beauty, and yet so much in need of help. May we discover pockets of wonder, even as we find spots of emptiness or hurt crying out for healing. We pray for discernment and wisdom in all that we do for you this day. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Just One More Try, Please (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Today we’ll work on finding one last bit of energy before stopping. Consider the times when you can’t think of another way to do or to think or to be, and you feel stuck. When we’re exhausted, we don’t feel creative, we can’t think of anything new, and we tend to settle for the mediocre rather than continuing to seek the best. When we are “too tired,” we can work in community to find new strength and more energy. We’re celebrating community through difficult stories today. We may laugh, we may cry, and we may raise our voices in frustration. We will understand and hold the community in love and prayer.

Supplies:

- Bibles, several translations if possible

Begin by reading Luke 5:1–11. Invite the group to consider the times when each has been too tired to make one more effort. Ask participants to think of a time of exhaustion. What brought it on? Were they emotionally drained, physically spent, spiritually empty, fresh out of hope? What were they doing before, and what did they do to recover their strength? What do we do when we don’t know what to do next, or to fix what’s broken, or to move on with our lives?

Jesus came upon a bunch of hot, sweaty, tired, discouraged people who were just done. He invited them to make one last effort, and then expanded the invitation to accompany him on a new, great adventure, using their well-learned skills in new ways. Sometimes it takes a new voice, a new face, to get us going again. Share stories of times when your energy has been renewed. *Were you able to then see your context with fresh eyes?* Listen to one another, and share your gifts and graces. When everyone who wishes to contribute has spoken, offer another time of silent reflection, and then close with a simple prayer.

2 Willing Heart, Helping Hands

Leader preparation: A brainstorming session often brings forth ideas that no one person would think of alone. Invite participants to name their favorite volunteer opportunities or ones they wish they’d tried. Include church ministries as well. One person can record the names of the organizations and descriptions of the ministry.

Supplies:

- Bibles, in several translations if possible
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Participants may have volunteered, or may have thought about volunteering, at various charitable organizations or church ministries. Invite people to name all the organizations or services the group can think of in which volunteers serve the community, from food banks to Mom’s Day Out, from highway clean-up to washing dogs at the animal shelter, from mentoring children to teaching in halfway houses, from working in the local library to helping at the local zoo or weeding the community garden. List all these on newsprint or a whiteboard.

Invite stories of previous volunteering experiences, or of times when people were helped by others. How do these past experiences encourage future volunteering?

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.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:16–20 as a group. How did people’s volunteer activities bring about beauty? How did they promote reconciliation? How did they make things new?

③ So Many Needs, So Little Time

Leader preparation: Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–13. Contemplate the seasons mentioned in this text. Do you find the list overwhelming? Ponder how much each person can do, how much is too much, and how much is not enough. How do we discern what will be helpful? When do we do something, and when do we teach others how to do something for themselves? How do we help without taking over someone else’s life or making decisions for that person? Is helping always helpful, or is helping sometimes intrusive and arrogant? With so much need in our community, how do we choose?

Supplies:

- Bibles, in several translations if possible, with optional place marks at Ecclesiastes 3:1–8
- large clear vase or pitcher
- rocks
- gravel or small pebbles
- sand
- water

Introduce a conversation about being called to serve and having too many opportunities to choose from. How do we decide what we can do without overextending ourselves? Some people will feel overwhelmed by the need and can easily try to do too much, wanting to fix everything themselves and forgetting that they, too, deserve care and healing. Some will feel overwhelmed by the need, and will give up without trying, because “what’s the use?” Some will feel called to a particular mission or service and will be able to focus on that, trusting that others will take up the slack somewhere else.

How do we decide? Do our work and family responsibilities dictate some of our decisions? Are some service opportunities beyond our present capabilities? Do we need to be trained for certain activities? For instance, if we volunteer to serve on a disaster response team, we must be able to leave our homes with very little notice for an unknown length of time. How can we be good stewards of our time and talents?

Try a simple exercise. Fill the vase or pitcher with large rocks. These represent important priorities. Then put in the small pebbles or gravel and see how they fill up the space. These may sift in around the rocks. Now the vase looks full. Note that once the large priorities are in place, others may fit around them. Then pour in the sand. Again the vase looks full. Finally, pour in the water and notice how there is still room for it. The idea of this illustration is not that we always have time or room to do one more thing. Rather, if the vase is like our life we must put in the large, important things first. If we fill our lives with “sand” or too much busy-ness, there isn’t room for the big priorities. We can crowd out the essential tasks.

Suggest that trying to stuff all our time into fixing the whole world, or leaving our families and our health behind in order to lay ourselves on the altar of sacrifice, or not doing anything, isn’t as helpful as thinking through a careful plan so that our willingness won’t be used up before we’ve accomplished anything.

If you wish, encourage each person to take home a stone that can serve as a reminder of the beauty of an ordered life that incorporates mission in a healthy way.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Calendar Prayers (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Look at your personal calendar before you begin this activity. Review the questions and answer them for yourself.

Supplies: None

Ask people to view their personal calendars if they have them available. If not, they may simply recall from memory some events that are upcoming. Invite people to note answers to the following questions:

- What activities bring me joy? Which bring me beauty? Are these necessarily the same?
- What beauty can I find in each activity on my calendar?
- What am I concerned about?
- What physical places do I expect to visit in the near future? How can I bring Christ's presence to these settings?
- What support do I need from the faith community?

Share your answers in pairs. Commit to pray for your partner through this week as you remember the activities on the calendars.



5 Stone Soup

Leader preparation: "We're so few, and the need is so great!" The plaint is often heard when the work seems overwhelming and the volunteers are few. Second Corinthians 8:1-7 speaks about the generosity that comes with abundant joy—not with abundant wealth. Remind the participants that no one person or group is expected to make the world perfect alone. We have God, one another, and communities throughout the world all working together. Some churches feel the call to address immediate needs: feeding the hungry; providing gently used clothing, furniture, and car seats for new babies; mentoring adults who wish to learn to read; maintaining trails in parks and forests. Those people depend upon other communities to address the longer, larger needs that lead to hungry people, or children without warm clothes, or environmental issues. People called to work on the big picture depend on those who meet immediate needs. It's a big circle, and we don't know everyone, but we're working together for the benefit of all. Our discerning work today can help us begin to find our calling.

Before the session ask the participants each to bring one vegetable, such as a potato, carrot, zucchini, tomato, turnip, and so forth. You may want to bring a few extra for visitors or those who forget.

Supplies:

- "Stone Soup," Attachment: Activity 5
- large pot
- stone
- vegetables brought by participants

Tell the story “Stone Soup,” Attachment: Activity 5. Invite the group to name some community needs that are too big for any single group to fix. Each of us has different gifts to contribute to the community of faith for mission. Let the vegetables people brought represent these different gifts. By themselves, each vegetable has a distinct character and flavor. Place the large pot in the center of the group. Put in the stone. Then, invite people to add their vegetable and identify one gift they can share with the larger community. Together these gifts will create an inviting aroma and a healthy meal. Plan to cook this stone soup and serve it to the group in the next session.

⑥ Where Is My Heart?

Leader preparation: One gift of being a leader is that we get to see participants’ gifts even when they don’t see them. This activity invites members of the group to share the blessings they notice in one other. As leader, you can model the way this is done. Perhaps you will say, “I discovered that you are able to find the blessing in a situation,” or “Your gift for listening is one that you will find very helpful in your chosen ministry.”

If the people in your group do not know one another, list the names of all the participants on newsprint or whiteboard. At the beginning of the activity you might have each person introduce him- or herself by name.

Supplies:

- Bibles, in several translations if possible, with optional place marks at 1 Corinthians 12:12–31
- several slips of paper for each person
- pens or pencils

Point out that naming our gifts and graces is one way to learn who God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do. When we read the stories of people in the Bible, we discover that God chooses the most unlikely people for the most amazing adventures.

Cain, who killed his brother, is saved by God, and his descendants founded cities, created art, and contributed in compelling ways to the beauty of the world. Who would have imagined that? Sarah was at times a bitter old woman, terrible in her wrath against her servant Hagar, but also the joyful, loving mother of Isaac. Abraham, the father of Ishmael and Isaac, was a maker of idols before God called him to go on a journey. Hagar, a runaway slave, was the first person to give God a name, El Roi, which means “you are the God who sees me.” Jacob, who stole his brother’s inheritance, and who could never find a way to live with his family, became one of the heroes of Genesis, in part because of his complicated character. Joseph, a smart-mouthed braggart, saved both Israel and Egypt from famine. Moses stuttered. Ruth was a Moabite, a foreigner. Rahab was an innkeeper whose house was in the outside wall of the city of Jericho. Who knows how God will call us? Who knows what God sees in us?

Ask people to write down the name of each participant on a slip of paper, including themselves. If there are eight people in the group, there will be sixty-four slips of paper. Under each person’s name, write a short description of a gift you perceive in him or her. (If there are newcomers, they may be encouraged to write blessings for others.) When all are finished, distribute the completed descriptions to everyone. Invite each person to choose one gift to share with the group, if she or he wishes.

Finish the session with a prayer for discernment and for confidence, and give thanks for gifts received. *Loving God, you create each day. We are your creation, and we discover with amazement those gifts you have given us to use as we celebrate your world. May we share and polish our gifts, so that your world can become more and more beautiful, piece by piece, as we learn and love. We pray in the name of your Son, Jesus, Amen.*

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Standing in the Doorway (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Prepare for the gathering by thinking about the process of making decisions and the emotions that contribute to it: anticipation, anxiety, fear, shyness, awkwardness, confidence or lack thereof, excitement.

Supplies:

- meeting room with a doorway
- (optional) peaceful instrumental music and player

Invite participants to describe a time when they stood in a doorway, deciding whether or not to proceed. It may have been a job interview, a restaurant, a party, or a possible new home. What were they thinking about? Were they excited, nervous, wondering, hesitant, confident? What helped them decide? How did they feel after they made the decision and took that next step?

In the ancient world gates and doorways were very important places. The gateway to the town was neither within the town nor outside the town. Market days were held in the town square—inside. Farmers lived near their fields and shepherds cared for their flocks outside the town. Trials were held and justice dispensed in the gateway—neither inside nor outside, but in between. When we stand in the doorway, we're neither inside nor outside the room. We're not in the hall, but we're not in the room. We're in between. Taking the first step toward participating in the work of the community means we stand in the doorway for a while, neither refusing to work nor actually working. Sooner or later, we make up our minds and take the next step: in or out. Yes or no. This task or that one.

Each of us came to this church for the first time once. We were outside and brought our whole selves through the door. Some of us were carried in as babies, and some of us came just recently. But we all came through the door. Something about that first experience brought us back again and brought some people here to this group.

If available, play music quietly. Invite each person to take a turn standing in the doorway of the meeting room. Others will silently pray for discernment for that individual. Give about 15 seconds for each person.

8 Transforming

Leader preparation: Think of situations that need to be transformed by God’s grace. Pause for a few moments to imagine them resolved. What emotions do you feel? Allow these images of hope and healing to comfort you.

Supplies:

- Bibles, in several translations if possible, with optional place marks at 2 Corinthians 5:16–20
- modeling clay

Invite people to think of situations that seem broken in their personal lives, the community, or the world. Volunteers may briefly share examples. Distribute clay. Ask people to fashion a shape that represents brokenness or conflict.

Read aloud 2 Corinthians 5:16–20. As you read, people will work with the clay, fashioning a new symbol that represents peace, wholeness, or transformation. Encourage people to share why they created what they did.

9 Prayer Connections

Leader preparation: Communities of faith have members who may be unable to attend worship or gather for fellowship for reasons of health, age, or distance. This activity helps them know that they remain a vital part of the community and that their church remembers and prays for them. It invites prayers for the church’s ministry and mission as well. The ecumenical Prayer Shawl Ministry’s website will be helpful if people want to start a group.

Supplies:

- hymn: “Over My Head,” African American traditional, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6GVc0rFTFw&feature=related>
- scarf or shawl
- (optional) Prayer Shawl Ministry website: <http://www.shawlministry.com/>

Share some information about prayer shawl ministries. Consult the website noted in the supply list if you wish. The ministry of prayer shawls is a loving circle within a faith community. People who are experiencing important changes in their lives are visited by the minister, someone from the pastoral ministry, or a person from the prayer shawl ministry. A prayer shawl is given to those who are marrying, welcoming a new family member, going through a time of illness or grief, moving, leaving home to attend college, or joining a mission. The gift of a prayer shawl helps people believe that their faith community knows and loves them, remembers them in times of change, and prays for them regularly. We can ask them to pray for the church; we all need the support of prayer!

Reflect

In what ways was it difficult or easy for the group to contemplate mission and context? What gives you the sense that people were encouraged by their time together? Remember that each group you lead changes participants’ sense of themselves as partakers in God’s work in the world. Your gift is valuable.

Introduce the hymn “Over My Head.” Invite the group to create a new verse that relates to a prayer shawl wrapped around someone’s shoulders, such as “Around my arms, there’s music (or prayers) in the air.” Pass around the prayer shawl as everyone sings. Choose a hymn that speaks of prayer or service to others. Each person may sit for a few moments with the shawl over his or her shoulders while the group sings. They will pray silently to be a blessing to others and receive the blessing of knowing that they are some of many who have received the prayers of God’s people.

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Attachment: Activity 5

Stone Soup

A lone traveler comes to a poor village carrying nothing more than an empty cooking pot. He's hungry and asks for a bit of food. The people in the village don't want to share any of their food with him. They are afraid they don't have enough for themselves, let alone a stranger. The traveler then asks where he might get some water. The villagers point him to the local stream. He goes to the stream and fills his pot with water.

He goes back to the middle of the village with his pot full of water. He builds a fire, places the pot over the fire, and drops a large stone in the pot.

One of the villagers becomes curious and asks what the stranger is doing. He answers, "I am making stone soup. It tastes wonderful, but it could use a bit of flavor." The villager says, "I have a small carrot I can give you." "Great," says the stranger, and adds the carrot to the pot.

Another villager comes by and asks what the stranger is doing. Again he answers, "I am making stone soup. It tastes wonderful, but it could use a bit of flavor." The villager says, "I have a small potato I can give you." "Great," says the stranger, and adds the potato to the pot.

More villagers come by and hear the story of the soup. Each one is willing to bring one more ingredient: a turnip, a tomato, a handful of beans, a cup of rice, a piece of garlic, a bit of salt and pepper.

Finally, the soup has cooked. And all the villagers shared a delicious pot of soup.

(There are many versions of this folk tale, including ethnic versions from China, France, Hungary, Portugal, and other Northern European countries.)

Experiencing Beauty



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Age Group

Seekers and new church participants are dealing with being “the new kid on the block” in the group when they begin visiting a faith community. They’re gradually getting to recognize faces, hymns, liturgy, and prayers; they may also be beginning to share in the life of the church. In some ways seekers may be used to change and to thinking about new ways of doing things. But in other ways, they may be looking for stability and comfort, so complete upset is not likely to be welcomed with enthusiasm. Also remember that some will have come from other churches, and the “former ways” are more familiar and either comforting or distracting, depending on each person. For long-term members who may be experiencing changes to their established practices, the challenges will be to accept graciously the differences of new personalities and new ways of being church—discovering and embracing beauty that is unfamiliar or unusual.

About this Exploration

As we engage with God, we grow in our capacity to understand God’s work. Yet the beauty of God’s handiwork is all around us in creation if we open ourselves to experience it. We often move from the traditional understanding of what it means for someone or something to be beautiful to a deeper awareness of the Divine in all that has been created. In Future and Vision, we explore the beauty of the cosmos, the earth beneath our feet, and the sea below. As we marvel at God’s handiwork in worship, we dare to imagine the wonders of God’s realm, both now and in the future.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Job 28:1-12
Revelation 21:2-5

Leader Preparation

As this group moves toward understanding self and others, you can continue to ask, “Who is God calling us to be?” and “What is our ministry in this community (church, state, country, world)?” Ideas may begin with the familiar, but can be expanded to include areas, practices, and people not usually encountered within our comfort zones. As leader, you get to believe in the possibilities, to help participants move beyond their own experiences, and to sometimes offer a little laughter. Remember, God teaches us to laugh as well as to weep, to change as well as to stand firm, and to find beauty as well as address the not-so-lovely.

Prayer: Thank you, loving, living God, for being constant in our lives, and for encouraging us to try new things. You are our rock, and yet you trust us to think for ourselves, to act on your behalf, and to invite your beauty into our understanding of your world. May we hear your voice and feel your guiding hand as we step out into the unknown, knowing that you come with us on every adventure. 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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Once in a While, a Little Peace and Quiet (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Meditation becomes a habit, but it often begins with learning to sit quietly for a few seconds. Assure the participants that they can begin with as little as 30 seconds and gradually increase over a number of weeks or months. If participants are unfamiliar with meditation, make the first experience brief, and each time the group meets, extend the time by a minute or so. Some might become so relaxed that they fall into a light nap. Doing so is not unusual. What better place to fall than into the arms of God?

This exercise can be used at any time during the day, anywhere, with any pattern of guidance. Invite participants to follow the most helpful guidance. For some, being alone at home is important; for others, a purring cat on the lap is helpful; for still others, being somewhere outdoors becomes the starting point. Meditations are as varied as people, and there is no correct or incorrect way. With practice, a brief period of meditation can be used even in the midst of busy-ness in an airport, an office, a tension-filled situation, or a hospital.

Supplies:

- Bible
- chairs, not close to another
- quiet gathering place where there will be no interruptions or loud noises

Invite people to sit comfortably and close their eyes while you read. Tell them there will be a time of quiet meditation after the reading. Encourage people to listen for words that particularly speak to them and hold those words in mind during the silence.

Read Revelation 21:2-5 slowly. After one minute of silence, invite people to open their eyes and share the words they were meditating on. *What images came to mind? Where in this text do you hear hope? Where do you sense beauty?*

Describe the practice of meditation as explained in the leader preparation section. Encourage the participants to begin a discipline of meditation for the next few weeks.



2 Praying the Future

Leader preparation: Prayer is central to the life of a healthy faith community. We often focus on current concerns when praying. This activity encourages people to consider the future as they pray.

Supplies:

- Bible
- artwork: “Wind from the Sea” by Andrew Wyeth, <http://www.art.com/products/p15524076-sa-i3804653/andrew-wyeth-wind-from-the-sea.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=dfff3132492f45b38c1f69b8ff1b86c1&searchstring=wind+from+the+sea>
- box or basket
- pencils
- (optional) slips of paper

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.

Talk with the group about what prayer is *not*: we cannot tell God what to do. Prayer is not guaranteed to heal or to remove someone from a tragic situation. God is with us always, but God never promises to whisk us away from life’s realities. Talk also with the group about what prayer *is*: inviting God into our lives and the lives of others, bringing an awareness of God’s presence and blessings. Knowing that prayers are being offered helps the subject of those prayers to be strong through adversity or new situations and to receive hope.

Ask people to view the print “Wind from the Sea” by Andrew Wyeth and to ponder the following questions silently:

- Sometimes God’s Spirit is compared to a wind. What thoughts does this comparison bring up?
- If looking through the window would show you the future of God’s work in the world, what might you see?
- How do you want God’s Spirit to enliven you?

Now ask people to write down one word that sums up their prayer for the world in the future. They will place the slips of paper in the box. Draw the slips and read each word aloud. Let these words be the prayer of the whole group. Finish by reading Revelation 21:2–5.

3 Extra! Extra! Read All About It!

Leader preparation: For this exercise your job is to gather the supplies and encourage the fertile imaginations of the participants. Depending on the size of your group, you might plan to break into smaller groups or choose one or more of the activities for the entire group to do together. Encourage imagination, silliness, dreaming, and real possibility. If this community has a wall for displaying the work of the members, sign up for a time when these pieces can be shown.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- worktables, enough for small groups to work separately
- large pieces of newsprint or poster board
- colored markers, colored pencils, or crayons
- old magazines with lots of pictures to cut out
- tape or glue

Imagine our church in ten, twenty-five, or fifty years. Ask for a volunteer to read Revelation 21:2–5. Lead a discussion based on the following questions for ten years, twenty-five years, and fifty years:

- What ministries are we sharing?
- How do we worship?
- What will be special about our community in the future?
- How are children welcomed, taught, encouraged?
- Who are our leaders?
- How do our choirs lead us in worship and help us to share our joy with others?
- Are we serving on mission trips?
- How is the youth group supporting its service projects?
- How many people share their gifts now and in the future?
- What are the headlines in the church newsletter?
- How are we inviting beauty into our community and world?

In small groups, create a visual depiction of the church in ten, twenty-five, or fifty years. Then share your visions and creations. *What headlines might you find in a church newsletter or bulletin? What images?*

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 Future Worship (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Don't hesitate to ask adults to sketch their ideas. We engage different senses when we have to act on an idea. Making their ideas tangible helps people to see them in new ways.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- paper
- pencils, colored pencils, markers

In small groups, develop a theme for a worship service that inspires people to hope in a good future. What theme might you choose? Design a bulletin cover that pictures your church in ten years. Will the building be the same, bigger, smaller? How will the landscaping change? In what ways will beauty play a part in the life of this future church? Sketch your ideas on the paper. Decorate it as you choose.

5 Enter and Rejoice

Leader preparation: Invite participants to recall their circumstances—emotional, geographical, spiritual—when they began thinking about finding a church community.

Supplies:

- hymn: “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>
- Bibles

While many people assume that the minister or pastor is responsible for inviting new members, studies show that the overwhelming majority of newcomers attend because they were invited by one or more of the people in the pews. Here's a basic fact of church biology: “Shepherds don't make sheep. Sheep make sheep.”

Ask the group members to share their experiences of seeking and finding a church.

- How did they begin looking?
- What were they looking for?
- When they walked into the first church they tried, what did they think and feel?
- What was missing?
- In what ways was the church welcoming?
- When they walked into this church, how long did it take for them to begin feeling comfortable?
- In what ways are they challenged as well as affirmed here?
- What was on their list of expectations or needs? Did they compromise some of those expectations because of other considerations?

Use these questions to bring out their stories. Encourage participants to think about this conversation when they meet someone who hasn't come to the end of his or her search yet.

Now encourage the group to picture the church in the future. What do they hope the church will look like? Who do they hope will be attending? What images of beauty do they see in this vision?

To finish, sing or read "In the Bulb There Is a Flower."

6 Let Us Bake Bread Together

Leader preparation: Locate some bread for this activity, preferably as fresh as possible. You might consider warming it slightly before people gather.

Supplies:

- a fresh loaf of uncut bread

Pass around the bread. Everyone may have a piece. Invite people to share stories that come to mind when they think of bread. Do they remember family meals? Do they remember times of hunger?

Talk about the process of making bread. A baker must mix and knead and then wait for yeast to rise. Discuss how baking bread is like the faith process. We work and wait. We hope. You might note that a reward of baking is in the smell of the yeast fermenting, then the fragrance of baking bread. How is working for the future like baking bread? What do people hope will "rise" in their lives? In the faith community? In the church worldwide? What rewards do we enjoy in the process? How does our faith work now bring future reward for ourselves and others?

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Lost in Wonder, Love, and Praise (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Familiarize yourself with any environmental or ecological efforts already in place in the church, such as recycling or avoiding using disposable cups and plates. In the context of the two scriptures, invite conversation about the ways we are called to take responsible care of the earth even though we were not its creators. Ask questions about how a diverse community of people who gather a few times a week for specific tasks can be mindful of its use of natural and manufactured resources. Allow the group to do most of the work!

Supplies:

- Bibles
- hymn: "For the Beauty of the Earth" by Folliot S. Pierpoint (tune: Dix), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHOMXiOKEDQ>
- newsprint or poster board
- markers, pencils
- (optional) computer with Internet access to play hymn

Read Job 28:1-11. In response to Job's questioning, God calls out the wonders of creation. We are called to be stewards for creation (Genesis 1:26-31). We have inherited a planet that is beautiful, blessed, and bounteous beyond measure, but is also blighted and taken for granted. We understand God's command to have

dominion as a call to be caretakers, making decisions that are beneficial for a flourishing, lively, sustainable, beautiful planet.

Invite people to craft cheerful posters to place over recycling bins. What slogans might they use? (The hymn title “For the Beauty of the Earth” is one possibility.)

Sing “For the Beauty of the Earth” together in closing.



8 Comfort in Chaos

Leader preparation: Be aware that some people may feel quite fearful about the future. Enter this experience with gentleness, seeking to spark courage as people contemplate the unknown.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Navaro Rapids” by Andro Hiroshigi, <http://www.art.com/products/p10023130-sa-i802528/ando-hiroshige-navaro-rapids-c1855.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=ab4fda6b36f84ed3b285828650303e96&searchstring=navaro+rapids>
- (optional) computer with Internet access and projector

Display “Navaro Rapids” by Hiroshige in a prominent place. Ask people to state words that would reflect their feelings if they were in the middle of this water. Have people ever felt this way about the future? Invite volunteers to share. What brought them hope during those times?

Invite people to picture themselves safely navigating the currents of future possibilities. How does God’s presence bring them comfort? What helps them to picture a future that is touched with beauty?

9 Reflecting Beauty

Leader preparation: Ponder where this journey in Experiencing Beauty has taken each participant and the group as a whole. What has been learned, and where can we go from here? Are there ministries to participate in or to invite others to share? Have new friends been made? Have new church participants met and worked with some of the established members? Has hope been shared? Has beauty been offered? How do participants feel about their work?

Supplies:

- hymn: “Over My Head,” African American traditional, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2DLSXYxp6Q&feature=related>
- hymn: “For the Beauty of the Earth” by Folliot S. Pierpoint (tune: Dix), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mHQMxiOKEDQ>
- hymn: “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” (tune: Promise), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>
- mirror, placed on table
- tea light candles
- matches or lighter

Sing “Over My Head.” Invite reflection on the ways God has been “over your heads” or present with your group. Each person who shares may light a tea light candle and set it on the mirror.

What have you discovered? Where has beauty shown up unexpectedly? When have you been able to offer beauty to another? How might you continue to discover, share, and celebrate beauty in the future?

Conclude by singing “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” or “For the Beauty of the Earth.” Invite each person to share a blessing for beauty with each other person: *May God bring you beauty and cause you to bring beauty into the world. Amen.*

Reflect

*May we go forth into your world in peace.
May we be strong and share our courage.
May we hold fast to what is good. May we
never render evil for evil. May we support
the weak, comfort the afflicted, encourage
the fainthearted. May we honor all people.
May we serve you, for you are our God,
who shares with us beauty we cannot imagine.
You bless our lives beyond our expectations.
May we continue to be surprised
and delighted in your world, and may we
delight you with our offerings, God of love
and grace. Amen.*