

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Discovery

About this Age Group

Older children have been through a time of tremendous growth and will remember and mark the changes. In school they have studied the environment and will be familiar with the natural life cycles of a number of organisms. Many of them have planted a garden and seen the progression from seed to harvest. All of these experiences provide a wonderful starting point for introducing the concepts of blessing and letting go. Some children in this age group know that letting go can sometimes be hard. They may have lived through changes in family circumstances that have been painful. Others may be reluctant to let go of things that are labeled as childish. In this Exploration older children will share and listen to stories of blessing and letting go and consider how they might bring words of blessing to others.

About this Exploration

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



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

Leader Preparation

Read the Bible Focus Passages and let them speak to you. What do they have to teach you about blessing and letting go? Think about a time when you struggled to let go. How was God a part of this process? As you look back, what blessings came into your life through this experience? How did the journey deepen your relationship with God? Spend time outside this week. Where do you see the rhythms of blessing and letting go at work in the natural world? What new insights about this faith practice do the natural cycles of God's creation have to offer?

Prayer: Loving God you have woven the cycles of blessing and letting go into the very fabric of creation. Be with me in this time of preparation so that I can come to a deeper understanding of this faith practice. I pray for the children who will accompany me on this journey of discovery that they may draw ever closer to you. 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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Bible Scavenger Hunt (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: List the following scripture references on newsprint or whiteboard.

Numbers 6:22-26
 1 Samuel 16:13
 Mark 1:9-11
 Mark 10:13-16
 Matthew 26:26-28

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- Bibles
- paper and pens

Through the ages people have prayed prayers of blessing. A prayer of blessing is when a person asks God to be present in someone's life in a particular way, calls on God to offer love and care to someone, and/or praises God's protection and guidance. There are many such blessings recorded in the Bible. Form small groups and display the newsprint or whiteboard with the passages listed. Have groups look up the passages, read them, and note who gives the blessing and who or what receives it. Give a round of applause to the first group to find the five examples of prayers of blessing. As a group, discuss:

- Which of these blessings do you recognize?
- Which of these blessings do we still use in our church today?
- How might prayers of blessing encourage us as followers of Jesus?

2 As We Grow

Leader preparation: Think about all the ways you have grown over the years. What changes did you embrace? What things did you find hard to leave behind? What are you looking forward to next?

Supplies:

- items of clothing representing different ages: baby, toddler, young child, older child, teen, adult

Pass around the articles of clothing. Encourage children to take turns trying on the larger pieces. Ask them to arrange the clothing in order of size. Have some conversation about who might wear each piece, and estimate how old that person would be. Compare the baby clothes with those for adults, and marvel at the miracle of growth. Encourage children to tell stories about their own growing and changing. Ask: *What can you do now that you couldn't do when you were younger?*

Explain that every time we grow, we leave behind our younger selves and move forward into a new adventure. Ask:

- What do you like best about being an older child?
- What do you miss about being a younger child?
- What things worry children as they think about growing up?



church). Using all nine activities could take 90–120 minutes.

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

- What do you think will be great about being a teen or adult?
- What do you wish would never change?
- What is the best thing about growing and changing?

Finish with a short prayer giving thanks to God for the wonderful ways the children are growing.

3 Juggling

Leader preparation: Watch the video at the link given below. Also, practice juggling with scarves, so that you can assist the children.

Supplies:

- thin, gauzy scarves (two per child)
- computer with Internet access, monitor or screen
- video: “How to Do 1 & 2 Scarf Juggling,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KwFHPNqRL_8&playnext=1&list=PL44411D57D6F63B94

Show the video “How to Do 1 & 2 Scarf Juggling.” Invite children to practice juggling with two scarves, showing the video again if needed. Spend time juggling. Afterward, invite the children to talk about their experiences: *What is the hardest thing about juggling?* Explain that in order to juggle successfully, a person has to be willing to let go of one thing in order to receive another. Ask:

- When might people have to let go of one thing in order to receive another?
- When might this be easy?
- When might it be hard?

Invite children to tell stories about times they had to let go of something (or say goodbye to someone) and the feelings associated with that.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Blessing Game (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Take time each day to name the blessings in your life. What effect does this discipline have on your relationship with God?

Supplies: None

- markers

Sit in a circle, and explain that the Bible encourages us to give thanks for the gifts with which God has blessed us. Begin a brief conversation about the blessings the children enjoy with the following discussion starters:

- Name one thing your family enjoys.
- Name one amazing thing in God’s creation.
- Name one thing you ate today.
- Name one talent God has given you.

Explain that all these things are blessings God has given us to enjoy. Play a game of “add on.” The first player starts by saying, “God has blessed us with . . . [name of a blessing].” The next person repeats what the first person has said and adds another blessing to the list. Keep going until you have gone around the circle,



helping one another to remember everything that has been said. Can you go round the circle twice?



5 Saying Goodbye

Leader preparation: Gather supplies. Spend time with the artwork “Christina’s World, 1948,” and take note of the thoughts and feelings it evokes in you. Display the artwork where the children will be able to see it easily.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Christina’s World, 1948” by Andrew Wyeth, <http://www.art.com/products/p10041656-sa-i783641/andrew-wyeth-christinas-world-1948.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=0f6ded272c5f442f8f4b43201f2adbfc&searchstring=christina%27s+world>
- drawing paper
- crayons or markers
- (optional) recording of “Time to Say Goodbye” performed by Sarah Brightman; music video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thXKwGEXyQo&feature=related>

Gather the children and invite them to sit quietly and look at “Christina’s World, 1948.” Ask them to describe what they see in the picture. Ask: *What feelings do you have while looking at this picture?*

Tell them the girl’s name is Christina. Invite them to make up some stories about Christina and what she is doing. If no one mentions it, suggest that Christina might be saying goodbye to the house she has lived in. *If this were the case, how do you think Christina feels?*

Invite children to share stories of times they had to say goodbye. Ask them what feelings they associate with saying goodbye. Distribute art supplies. Play the song “Time to Say Goodbye,” if you have it, and invite children to create a design that speaks to them of saying goodbye.

6 Window Greenhouse

Leader preparation: Hold a seed or flower bulb in your hand and think about the marvels of germination and growth. What does this seed have to tell you about blessing and letting go? Draw a 5” × 4” rectangle in the middle of a sheet of cardstock. Carefully cut out this rectangle, leaving a frame with a hole in the middle. Prepare one frame for each child.

Supplies:

- cardstock, cut as directed in Leader preparation
- small, self-adhesive flower stickers
- markers
- tape
- a packet of flower seeds, such as sunflower, marigold, or zinnia
- a few tulip, crocus, or daffodil bulbs
- self-locking sandwich bags
- cotton balls
- container of water
- song: “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” by Natalie Sleeth (tune: Promise), http://www.hymnary.org/text/in_a_bulb_there_is_a_flower; music video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>



Read aloud the lyrics to the first verse of “In the Bulb There Is a Flower.” Pass around the seeds and flower bulbs for the children to examine. Ask:

- What do you think the songwriter means by the words “In the bulb there is a flower / in the seed, an apple tree”?
- What has to happen before we see the flower or apple tree?
- In what ways do the seeds or bulbs have to let go in order to become flowers and trees?
- What blessings or gifts do we enjoy because seeds and bulbs do this?

Distribute greenhouse frames. Invite children to use markers and flower stickers to decorate frames on one side. You might encourage children to write a simple statement about the blessings of plants, such as “God sees the flower inside the seed.” Guide the children in making window greenhouses by giving these instructions, one at a time.

1. Dip three cotton balls in water.
2. Pull them apart and place the cotton in the bottom of the plastic bag.
3. Place several seeds onto the wet cotton.
4. Seal the sandwich bag and tape it to the back of cardstock frame, so that seeds are visible through opening.

Take home the window greenhouse and tape it to a window. Check each day to see what is happening. Once the seeds have germinated, they can be planted in a flower pot or garden

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Being a Blessing (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Think about all the people who have been a blessing to you in the past week. Pass on these blessings by performing an act of kindness for someone else.

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- index cards
- pens
- Bible

Have children brainstorm ten things they would like someone to do for them, and record the list on newsprint or whiteboard. The suggestions have to be practical and fairly easy to accomplish, such as clean my room, do one of my chores, or fix me a great snack. While you are looking at the list, ask: *In what ways would it be a blessing to have these things done for you?*

Read aloud Matthew 7:12, and talk about what that means. Go back to the list you created, and have children pick two things that they can do for a family member in the coming week. Have them write the suggestions on an index card as a reminder. If you will be meeting together again soon, ask the children to report on how it went. Have a group high five to celebrate the ways you are able to be a blessing to others.



8 God's Eyes

Leader preparation: Read 1 Samuel 16:1–23, and think about a time when you had to let go of your own understanding and look at things through God's eyes. How did it change your perspective? Follow the instructions on the Kaboose website to make a sample God's Eye: <http://crafts.kaboose.com/gods-eyes.html>.

Supplies:

- Bible
- craft sticks
- white glue
- yarn in different colors

Read aloud 1 Samuel 16:1–23, the story of the anointing of Samuel. Lead a discussion of the story by asking the following questions.

- Why do you think Samuel thought the older sons should be king?
- What ideas about kings did Samuel have to let go in order to fulfill God's command?
- What new understandings did Samuel have to accept?
- How do you understand the meaning of verse 7?
- How did looking at things through God's eyes change the way Samuel saw things?
- How might looking at things through God's eyes change the way we see things? How might it change the way we treat others?

Show the children the God's Eye you have made, and invite the children to make their own decorations. Guide the group in making God's Eyes using craft sticks and different colors of yarn. Encourage children to take their decorations home and hang them as reminders to look at things through God's eyes.

9 Go with a Blessing

Leader preparation: Think about times when you have been sent forth with words of blessing. What impact have such prayers had on your faith journey and sense of community?

Supplies:

- olive oil
- small bowl
- Bible

Pour a small amount of olive oil into the bowl, and invite children to touch and smell it if they wish. Explain that from the earliest Bible times, people have used olive oil to remind others that God is with them, that God loves them, and that they are special to God. Many church communities still do this today. Read aloud Ephesians 3:16–19 as an example of a prayer of blessing.

Have everyone stand in a circle. Hold the bowl of oil as each child dips a finger and makes the sign of the cross on the hand of the person next to him or her. As you go around the circle, encourage the group to say an affirmation such as "[Child's name], God is with you," or "[Child's name], may you know how high



Reflect

What do you think the children discovered about this faith practice through these activities? What new insights about blessing and letting go did you receive as a result of their comments and questions?

and wide God's love is for you." Ask for a volunteer to anoint your hand. Pause for a moment of quiet and then pray this or a similar prayer of blessing: *May God bless you and keep you. May God smile on you and give you peace. Amen.*

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Scripture

About this Age Group

Older children are just beginning to explore the Bible. Reading skills vary widely, so it is important to offer a variety of approaches when engaging with the scriptures. Children will benefit from hearing the scriptures read aloud, so try to offer them the chance to do this. By this stage of development, children want more than just a retelling of the Bible stories—they need to understand how the scriptures intersect with their own lives. This Exploration provides the opportunity for the children to look at the scriptures through the practical application of the faith practice in their lives.

About this Exploration

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



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:
Deuteronomy 34:1–12
Matthew 5:43–48

Leader Preparation

Watch the video “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” on YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkWYubdnc7o>. How do these images from nature deepen your understanding of blessing and letting go? What in your life is in the process of transition right now? Hold up this concern in prayer, and imagine what new blessings God will bring forth in your life as you let go and trust in God’s leading.

Prayer: Transforming God, letting go of old things and embracing new adventures can be hard at times. Give me wisdom as I explore these ideas with the children. Grant me courage for the journey and a willingness to embrace all you have to offer. 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.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 How Does It Feel? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Deuteronomy 34:1–12. Think of a time when you had to say goodbye. Who or what sustained you through the transition? What blessings unfolded as a result?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- large stones
- (optional) stonelike objects, such as paper lunch bags stuffed with some kind of paper or brown or gray construction paper cut to look like a stone

Distribute Bibles. Using the following discussion outline, ask for volunteers to read aloud the Bible passages. Pause after each reading, and engage children in a discussion, using the questions provided.

A. Read aloud Deuteronomy 34:1–4. Moses has led the people through the wilderness for 40 years. Now they have arrived, but it is time for Moses to let go and allow someone else to take on the role of leader. Imagine that you are Moses.

- How are you feeling?
- What are you thinking?
- What will be hard about letting go and allowing someone else to lead the people?
- What blessings might come as you do this?

B. Read aloud Deuteronomy 34:5–8. The people have followed Moses for 40 years. He is the only leader they have known. Now, just as they are about to move into a new land, Moses died. Imagine that you are one of the people of Israel.

- How are you feeling?
- What are you thinking?
- What do you think it will be like without Moses as leader?
- How will you say goodbye to Moses?

C. Read aloud Deuteronomy 34:9–12. Joshua was chosen to be Moses’ apprentice. He has worked alongside Moses for many years learning, how to lead the people. Imagine that you are Joshua.

- How are you feeling?
- What are you thinking?
- What is the scariest thing about letting Moses go and saying goodbye to him?
- What blessings are you looking forward to?

When you have finished discussing the story, ask: *What can we learn from this story about letting go and saying goodbye?*

Invite children to tell stories about times when their loved ones or pets died. Ask: *What did you do to say goodbye?*



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

Distribute stones (or stonelike objects), and explain that in some cultures people use stones to build memorials to help them remember and say goodbye to those who died. Invite children to build a memorial with their stones. If they wish, they can name a loved one or pet as they place a stone on the pile. Some children may wish to place more than one stone. Gather around the memorial and ask for a moment of silence. Finish with this brief prayer: *Loving God, thank you that we can gather to remember. Please comfort anyone who has to say goodbye to a loved one today. Amen.*

2 Breath Prayers

Leader preparation: Practice the prayer exercise described in the activity below. In what ways does it enable you to let go and pray for those who have hurt you? If necessary, bend thin wires or pipe cleaners to form bubble-blowing wands.

Supplies:

- bubble mixture (recipes at <http://bubbleblowers.com/homemade.html>)
- bubble-blowing wands, or thin wires or pipe cleaners

Ask the children to sit quietly and slowly breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out. As they breathe, encourage the children to think of people who have been mean or unkind to them. Invite children to continue breathing and take a few moments to rest quietly in God’s love. Encourage them to breathe in God’s love and breathe out any anger they might feel toward those who have hurt them. As they continue to breathe deeply, ask them to imagine what it would be like to pray for those people. *What might happen if God’s love surrounded those people and filled them to overflowing?* Have children continue to breathe in God’s love and then as they breathe out say: “God bless . . . [name of someone who was hurtful].”

Distribute bubble mixture, and invite children to continue the breath prayers and blow bubbles as they breathe out. *Watch the bubbles float away and imagine that when the bubbles burst, they shower God’s love over those for whom you are praying.*



3 Growing and Changing

Leader preparation: Gather supplies. Read Exodus 2:11–15, Exodus 3:1–6, Deuteronomy 34:9, and Matthew 3:13–17. Each of these represents a time of transition for the person involved. When have you been blessed by an event that changed your life, even in subtle ways? Display the artwork where the children can see it. Print the title “New Beginnings” on a piece of newsprint and put it near the artwork.

Supplies:

- artwork: “The Baptism of Jesus” by Pheoris West, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1725021198?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37961&store_id=1401
- newsprint, markers

Show the artwork and invite children to talk about the painting, allowing them time to tell about the features that catch their eyes. Acknowledge all thoughts in a positive way. Tell them that this is a picture of Jesus at the time of his baptism. Ask children to tell you what they know about that story (Matthew 3:13–17), recapping it briefly if necessary. Explain that the baptism of Jesus marked a new beginning for him. After Jesus was baptized, he stopped being a full-time carpenter and became a teacher, telling people about God’s love and how God wants us to live.



Ask children to talk about times when they started doing something they had never done before. As children tell their stories, make a list of these times on the newsprint. Observe how each new beginning can be a blessing (such as being able to do things on their own), but it also means letting go of the way things were (such as having someone feed them or tie their shoes).

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Fit to Be Tied! (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Think of the ways anger or hurts have tied you up inside. If possible, be prepared to tell the children what letting go of the anger or hurt felt like.

Supplies:

- ribbon or yarn, cut into 18" lengths

Form groups of three. Using ribbon or yarn, loosely tie the children's wrists to one another so that each group of three forms a small circle. Tell groups to perform a number of tasks, such as: get a drink, make a snack, write their names on a piece of paper, tie their shoes. After they have completed a few tasks, gather together and talk about the experience of being tied to others. Ask: *In what ways were the tasks more difficult because your wrists were tied together?*

Discuss how not being willing to forgive others can bind us and make even the simplest activities more difficult to accomplish. Invite children to name times when anger or hurt seemed to "take over" all their other feelings. Ask: *What can people do to let go of such feelings?*

Read Matthew 5:43–44 to the group. Go around the circle and untie children's wrists, saying: *[Child's name,] love your enemies and pray for those who cause trouble for you.*

5 Drumming Relay

Leader preparation: Gather supplies for each child to make a simple drum, such as the one found online at "Squidoo," <http://www.squidoo.com/kids-musical-instruments>. If it is not possible to make drums, consider how the children may use their bodies or objects in the room to make drumming sounds. For example, they could pat thighs or drum on a tabletop with hands or pencils. You might borrow some plastic bowls or some cooking pots from the kitchen to make a different sound.

Supplies:

- materials to make drums, such as oatmeal boxes or coffee cans with lids
- construction paper to decorate drums
- markers
- Bible or children's story Bible

Following the instructions and using the supplies you've chosen, invite learners to create their own drums. Let the children experiment with the different rhythms they can produce by hitting their drums. If you are not able to make drums, ask



children how they can make drumming sounds by using their bodies or objects in the room.

Sit in a circle and ask for a volunteer to start drumming. Let them drum for a short time and then point to another child, who starts drumming while the first person stops. Continue until everyone has had a turn. Ask:

- What was it like to be the one drumming?
- What was it like to have to wait to drum?
- How did you feel when you had to stop and let someone else to take over?

Read aloud Deuteronomy 34:1–12. Comment that Moses needed to let go of the job he started and pass on the responsibility to Joshua. God wants us to work together. It can be a blessing to let go and have someone else carry on the work.

6 Caterpillars and Butterflies

Leader preparation: Think about times when you went through significant growth and change. What did you learn about letting go in these times of transition? What blessings did you receive as a result of the transformation? Make a sample of the craft according to the instructions at the link given below, so you can become familiar with the cutting and folding technique.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access, monitor or screen
- video: “A Butterfly’s Life,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tR2qOGpXrt0&feature=related>
- copies of caterpillar and butterfly patterns, found at <http://www.thinkingfountain.org/n/nowyouseeit/nowyouseeit.html>
- crayons or markers
- paper cutter
- black construction paper
- glue sticks

Gather the children to watch the video “A Butterfly’s Life.” Have children name the different stages in the life cycle of butterflies. Ask:

- As the butterfly moves from egg to caterpillar to cocoon to butterfly, what changes does it experience?
- What does it have to let go?
- What blessings might it experience though each change?
- What do you learn about growing and letting go from these amazing insects?

Distribute the patterns for the caterpillar and butterfly from the website at the link given above and have children color them with crayon or marker. Referring to this website as needed, give children the following instructions, step by step, to make caterpillars that change into butterflies:

1. Use a paper cutter to cut the patterns into strips. *Note:* It is *very* important that all strips are cut to exactly the same width.
2. Piece the pictures of the caterpillar and butterfly back together to make sure you have them in the correct order.
3. Glue alternating strips of caterpillar and butterfly to black construction paper.



- Carefully fold the construction paper concertina style, so that the caterpillar picture is on one side of the folds and the butterfly picture is on the other.

When you push the folds in one direction you will see the caterpillar and when you push them in the other you will see the butterfly. Encourage children to take home these papers and tell their families what they have learned about letting go from the life cycle of a butterfly.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Good-bye Game (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Print the following list of farewell greetings on newsprint:

goodbye	bye-bye so long	farewell
shalom	alohaciao	sayonara
adieu	bon voyage	auf wiedersehen
adios	peace be with you	have a good day
love you	see ya later	see ya later alligator
in a while crocodile		

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint
- index cards
- pens or pencils

Place the newsprint list on a table where everyone can read and reach it. Invite children to take a marker and mark dots by the farewell greetings that they use. Have them make two dots by the greetings they use regularly and one dot by the ones they use occasionally. Ask:

- Which phrases are most commonly used by your friends?
- Do you know any other ways of saying goodbye?

Explain that the word “goodbye” came from the phrase “God be with ye.” Over the years the phrase was slowly shortened to “goodbye.” When we say “good-bye,” we are actually saying a short prayer of blessing.

Give two index cards to everyone. Ask the children to choose a farewell greeting from the newsprint chart and print it out twice, once on each card. If you have a small group, children can print out more than one greeting. Shuffle cards and use them to play a game of “matching” or “concentration” (for rules, go online to <http://www.dltk-kids.com/games/concentration.htm>). Give a round of applause for the player or team who finds the most matches.



8 Jesus Blesses the Children

Leader preparation: Gather supplies. Spend time studying the artwork. Place yourself in the picture as one of the children and listen to Jesus’ words of blessing. Now place yourself in the picture as one of the adults. How could you help the children reach Jesus?



Supplies:

- artwork: “Christ Among the Children” by Emile Nolde, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1725021198?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=37961&store_id=1401
- drawing paper
- art supplies, such as charcoal pencils, colored pencils, pastels, colored chalk, crayons, markers

Give children time to look at “Christ Among the Children,” and invite them to make up some stories about the picture. Ask:

- Who are these children?
- Where did they come from?
- Why did they want to see Jesus?
- What do you think they are saying to Jesus?
- What do you think Jesus is saying to them?
- If you could step into this picture what would you say to Jesus?

Distribute paper and encourage each child to create her or his own picture of Jesus blessing the children, placing the child and her or his friends in the picture. Display pictures with a title chosen by the group.

9 Go with a Blessing

Leader preparation: Watch the video “The Lord Bless You,” and learn how to sign the first line of the song. If you need to double-check the signs, you can look up individual words online at <http://www.signingsavvy.com/>. Print these words on newsprint or a whiteboard:

The Lord bless you and keep you.

Supplies:

- music video: “The Lord Bless You,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUcMg_vSiEc
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

From the earliest Bible times people have said prayers of blessing over others. It is a way of asking God to be present in someone’s life. Many church communities do this at the end of their worship services. Invite the children to use a very old prayer of blessing found in Numbers 6:24.

Reflect

Where did you see fresh insights about blessing and letting go emerging from the creative activities today? What concepts seemed to cause difficulty? How might you reinforce these ideas in future activities?

Gather in a circle. Say the words of blessing and make the signs as you do. Ask children what they know about signing, explaining if necessary that signing is a way of communication used by those who cannot hear. Show children how to sign each word, repeating the signs until everyone has learned them. As a group, bless each child, in turn, using the words and signs. If you are able to extend this activity over several weeks, you may wish to teach the complete prayer of blessing, adding one phrase at a time.

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Age Group

Children at this stage of development are starting to develop their own belief systems and make their own decisions. This is an exciting stage of transition, because discipleship becomes a personal choice. This age group can be skeptical at times. They may wonder if it is possible to let go and follow Jesus' way of love in the world today. Share your experiences of blessing and letting go and the way it has affected your faith journey. Be concise and be real. They want and need to hear about both your struggles and joys along the journey. Encourage the children to explore what it means to let go of their own agendas and follow Jesus daily in both attitude and behavior.

About this Exploration

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



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Proverbs 3:5–9
Colossians 3:12–17

Leader Preparation

Living as a disciple of Jesus is a sacred dance of letting go, blessing, and being blessed. Think about your faith journey. How has your trust in God's love and faithfulness enabled you to let go? What blessings have you received as a result? When do you find it hard to trust God? What might help you trust in those situations? What things in your life hold you back from full discipleship? What could you do to let them go?

Prayer: Patient God, as we grow in faith, give the children and me courage to follow you with our whole hearts and let go of anything that prevents us from living and loving like Jesus did. 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.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Practicing Our Faith (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Colossians 3:12–17. In what ways does this describe your attitudes and behaviors? What might you need to practice some more? Be ready to talk about your experiences with the children.

Supplies:

- coins
- masking tape
- plastic container
- table

Distribute coins and invite children to try one of the following tricks.

- Place a coin on the edge of a table. With one finger, flick the coin into the air and try to catch it with the same hand.
- Place some masking tape near one end of the table. Stand about 3 feet from the tape, and with thumb and forefinger, try to flick the coin so that it lands on the tape.
- Place a container on the floor. Stand about 5 feet away and try to toss the coin into the container.

Encourage them to practice one of the tricks until they have mastered it. If they don't succeed at first, encourage them to keep practicing until they get it. Afterward, have some discussion about the coin tricks: How did it feel to keep trying?

Invite children to tell about other experiences of having to practice in order to master a skill. *How does practicing help?*

Read aloud Colossians 3:12–17. Ask learners: *When might this be hard to do?* Explain that, as followers of Jesus, we are constantly practicing our faith. Sometimes we make progress; other times we don't and we may get discouraged. When we feel discouraged, we need to remember that we are still practicing. Offer a few examples from your own life. Affirm that God's Spirit helps us to let go and become more like Jesus, but it doesn't happen overnight. Brainstorm ways of practicing the suggestions given in the Bible passage. Challenge children to pick one idea and practice living it out this week.

2 Finding the Balance

Leader preparation: Take a quick inventory of your life. Would you describe it as balanced? How might the suggestions in Colossians 3:12–17 help you find some balance? What might you have to let go in order to find balance? What blessings might result?

Supplies:

- a ruler for each child
- Bibles
- hardbound books
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard



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

Distribute rulers and ask children to balance them on the tip of one finger while walking slowly around the room. Afterward, ask:

- How hard was it to balance the ruler while you were walking?
- What caused you to lose the balance?

If you have time, also have them try some of the following balancing activities.

- Place a hardbound book on your head. Balance it on your head while you walk around the room. Crouch down and touch the floor without dropping the book.
- Stand with two feet firmly on the floor. Slowly lift one foot off the floor. Then put the foot down and try balancing on the other foot. Now balance on one foot and close your eyes.
- In bare feet or wearing socks, stand with two feet firmly on the floor. Slowly rock back on your heels and hold the position.

Wonder together about what it means to find balance in life. Explain that part of finding happiness in life is keeping a balance in all the activities we do—playing, learning, sleeping, laughing, and serving others. We must also be able to let go of things and thoughts that weigh on us and pull us off balance. Discuss:

- What are some things that might pull someone off balance in his or her life?
- How can we let go of those things and thoughts that cause hurt and anger in our lives?

Distribute Bibles and ask a volunteer to read aloud Colossians 3:12–17. Together, list on newsprint or whiteboard what the writer says about letting go and keeping balance in one's life. Encourage each child to choose one suggestion from this passage to practice during the week to come.

3 Trust Walk

Leader preparation: Designate a large square or an area that will serve as a playing area. Place many objects throughout the area.

Supplies:

- Bible
- objects such as traffic cones, balls, small boxes, chairs
- blindfolds

Read aloud Proverbs 3:5 to the children and have them repeat it after you several times. Ask: *What does the word “trust” mean to you?*

Explain that you are going to play a game that illustrates the concept of trust. Form pairs and gather on one side of the playing area. Have one person from each pair put on a blindfold. Tell blindfolded children to stand behind their partner, putting their hands on the shoulders of their partner, who will lead them. Remind the children who will be leading to walk slowly and make sure their partners do not bump into any of the obstacles. Have pairs find a way through the playing area and then trade places to go back again.

After everyone has walked through the obstacle course while blindfolded, ask:



- What did it mean to trust your partner in this game?
- How did you show your trust?
- What is difficult about trusting another person?
- What does it mean to trust God?
- How might we demonstrate our trust in God?

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Living in Peace (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Familiarize yourself with the song “Shalom Chaverim.”

Supplies:

- Bible
- song: “Shalom Chaverim,” traditional Hebrew blessing (tune: Shalom), <http://www.musickit.com/resources/shalomchaver.html>; music video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2pm6XGvnn>

Lead the children in singing “Shalom Chaverim.” Sing it two or three times, and then form two groups and sing the song in a round. Afterward, have some discussion about musical harmony and what it sounds like. Ask:

- How were we able to achieve musical harmony with our singing?
- How is making musical harmony like living in harmony?
- What does it mean to live in harmony?
- What kinds of things help us to live in harmony with others?
- What things might prevent us from living in harmony?

Have children form pairs and read Colossians 3:12–17. Challenge each pair to find two ideas for living in harmony. Ask each pair to create a short skit that shows how people might put one of these ideas into practice. Allow time for groups to present their skits to each other.



5 Forgiveness

Leader preparation: Spend time studying the artwork “Forgiveness” by Thierry Ona. How does this image speak to you of forgiveness? Cover the title of the artwork and display it in the learning area.

Supplies:

- artwork: “Forgiveness” by Thierry Ona, <http://www.art.com/products/p12191417-sa-i2792541/thierry-ona-forgiveness.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=6c47c0957fdb4b65a64ba2cbe037088f&searchstring=forgiveness>
- Bible
- sticky notes
- pens

Look at “Forgiveness” by Thierry Ona together and invite the children’s observations and comments. Ask:



- What feelings come to mind when you look at this picture?
- What do you think is happening here?
- What may have happened just before this?

Explain that the title of this picture is “Forgiveness.” Together, wonder how knowing title might help you to understand it differently.

Have children form pairs. Invite each pair to pose as the people in the picture. Instruct them to hold the pose for about 30 seconds and then switch places. After doing this, ask:

- What do you think each person is feeling?
- What do you think they are saying to each other?

Read aloud Colossians 3:13, and then ask:

- How does it feel to ask for forgiveness?
- What might we have to let go in order to forgive someone else?
- What blessings might we receive by telling someone that we forgive him or her?
- How might our world change if everyone followed the ways of forgiveness? Print the children’s suggestions on sticky notes and place them around the picture.

6 Guidance for the Journey

Leader preparation: Try making a paper compass ahead of time, following the instructions at the link given below. Think of a time when you needed guidance. In what ways did your faith help you? How did God provide the guidance you needed?

Supplies:

- instructions for making a paper compass, <http://adventuresofarainbow-mamamama.blogspot.com/2009/05/making-needle-compass-placing-4.html>
- sewing needle
- magnet
- bowl of water
- small circle of paper
- compass
- Bible

Ask children to tell you what they know about compasses, explaining their function if necessary.

- When might we need the guidance provided by a compass?
- What situations might we face where a compass could not provide the kind of guidance we need?
- What decisions do you make on an ordinary day?
- Who or what helps you make those decisions?
- What kinds of decisions might you have to make as you get older?



Having the children help you, follow the instructions for making a paper compass at the link given above. Use your compass to check that the needle of the paper compass is indeed pointing north.

Read aloud Proverbs 3:5–6. Explain that for the Hebrew people, the heart represented the whole body. Everything, including a person’s thoughts, feelings, and actions came from the heart. Ask:

- What would it mean to trust God with your whole heart?
- What is the blessing that is promised in return?
- How might God guide us?
- How is scripture like a compass, a guide for the direction we should go in life?

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Go with a Blessing (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: If your church community encourages learners to bring their own Bibles and highlight verses, encourage children to do so in this activity. Have copies of the scripture passage available for children who do not have Bibles.

Supplies:

- “Ephesians 3:14–20,” Attachment: Activity 7
- different colors of highlighter pens
- pens
- index cards
- colored pencils

Talk about what the word “blessing” means, and work together to come up with some definitions. Invite children to talk about when and how they have heard the word “blessing” used. Have learners turn to Ephesians 3:14–20 in their Bibles, or distribute the attachment. Observe that this Bible passage is an example of a prayer of blessing. This is when a person asks God to be present in someone’s life in a particular way, calls on God to offer love and care to someone, or announces God’s protection and guidance.

Help children form small groups. Tell each group to read the passage together. Have group members help one another identify the different gifts of blessing that are being asked for and highlight them using different colors. Reconvene the group and ask:

- How many gifts of blessing did you find?
- What would it be like to know that someone was asking God to give these things to you?
- When might we offer a prayer of blessing for someone?

Distribute index cards and invite children to write short prayers of blessing on them. They might use some of the verses from Ephesians 3:14–20 or create their own. Decorate the edges of the card with simple designs. Have children exchange cards with one another to take home as a blessing for them in the week to come.



8 Trust Pendants

Leader preparation: Arrange for pendants to be baked.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- polymer clay (available in craft stores)
- rolling pin
- toothpicks
- cookie sheets
- plastic or leather lacing
- sharp knives
- (optional) small cookie cutters in a variety of shapes

Distribute Bibles and have children find Proverbs 3. Ask for volunteers to read verses 5–7 aloud. Ask:

- What does it mean to trust someone?
- What do these verses encourage us to do?
- How might God show us the right way to go?
- What is hard about trusting God?
- What would you say if someone asked, “Why should I trust God?”

Distribute clay, and demonstrate how to squeeze it in your hands until it becomes warm and pliable. Comment that in many ways the passage from Proverbs encourages us to become like the clay. We let go and relax in the warmth of God’s love and trust that God will shape our lives into something amazing.

Roll out clay and use knives or cookie cutters to cut into desired shapes. Use toothpicks to etch the word “Trust” into pendants. Make holes in tops of shapes for stringing. Follow package instructions to bake clay. When cool, string pendants onto plastic or leather lacing. Explain that the pendants can be worn, tied to back packs, or hung in a special place to remind them of God’s loving guidance in their lives.

9 Blessing Plaques

Leader preparation: Make a sample plaque following the instructions given below. Think about a time when someone affirmed your life as a blessing to others. Give thanks for all those who have encouraged and affirmed you in your journey of faith.

Supplies:

- 12" × 12" squares of cardboard
- (optional) squares of copier paper the same size as the cardboard.
- kitchen foil
- tape
- blunt pencils
- yarn

Have children fold sheets of kitchen foil in half with the shiny side out. Demonstrate how to place foil on the table and put a cardboard square in the middle of the foil. Fold foil around squares and secure with tape. Turn squares over. Have



Reflect

What did the children say or do that indicates a willingness to follow Jesus' example of loving and forgiving? How might you continue to encourage and affirm them as fellow disciples?

children use blunt pencils to emboss the foil on the squares. Start by printing the words "You are a blessing" in the middle. Fill in the rest of the square with swirls and dots. Tape a hanging loop onto the back of the plaque. Children may wish to design their plaque on a square of paper first, place it over the foil square, and trace over their design with a pencil.

As you work, talk about the encouragement these plaques may bring. Remind children that encouraging others is a blessing we can offer. Ask children to take home their plaques and give them to friends or family members who would appreciate a reminder that they are a blessing to others.



Ephesians 3:14–20 (NRSV)

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Age Group

Most older children are familiar with family and church traditions, though they won't necessarily see them as examples of blessing and letting go. At home they will have watched some of their own family traditions evolve through the years, so they will understand that sometimes we need to let go of traditions, move on, and change the way we do things. Some of the older children may be starting to experience certain traditions as boring and irrelevant. If this is so, they may welcome the opportunity to express their frustration and suggest changes. Be ready to listen respectfully and take their comments seriously.

About this Exploration

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



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Psalm 148
Acts 10:1–48

Leader Preparation

Christian traditions are intended to draw us closer to God. They bring comfort and support in times of transition and grief. Sometimes, though, these very traditions can act as barriers to others. Prepare yourself to see some of your church's traditions through the fresh eyes of the children. As you prepare for these activities, remind yourself to be open to the Spirit's voice speaking through your group. How willing are you to let go and embrace new expressions of faith?

Prayer: Transforming God, give me your wisdom as I choose the activities for the energetic learners in my group. Help me to see our traditions through their eyes and be open to changing those things that may hinder others from experiencing your love. 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.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Paper Weaving (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Make a sample paper weaving according to the instructions on the attachment. As you work, think about the traditions in your church. Are there any that might be a stumbling block for some people? How might these traditions be changed to become more inclusive?

Supplies:

- Bible
- "Paper Weaving," Attachment: Activity 1
- construction paper
- scissors
- rulers
- pens

Read aloud the story of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10:1–48. With learners, discuss the ways that Cornelius and Peter changed in this story.

Distribute art supplies and follow steps on the handout "Paper Weaving" to weave a square of paper. Before weaving, have children choose two strips of paper. On one strip they should print the word "traditions" over and over along the strip. On the other strip, have them print the word "rules" over and over along the strip. Tell them to use both strips when weaving squares. Do not secure strips with glue.

In Peter's time, certain traditions and rules were considered to be a very important part of the community. Following those rules reminded the people that they belonged to God. Sometimes, though, these same rules and traditions got in the way of sharing God's love. God's Spirit came to show Peter a new way.

Ask children to pick out two more strips. On one, print the words "new ways" over and over along the strip. On the other strip, print the words "all are welcome" over and over along the strip. Explain that Peter and his friends had to let go of some of their rules and traditions so that everyone could hear the message of God's love. Demonstrate how to remove the strips that say "traditions" and "rules" by pulling gently on one end of each strip. Replace these with the strips that say "new ways" and "all are welcome." Explain that each of them still has a woven square; it just looks a little different.

2 Molding Clay

Leader preparation: Take time to play with the Plasticine® or clay or Play Dough. Name the ways in which God has molded and reshaped your faith community over the years. Look to see if there are any areas of tension in your community right now. Could this be something that God is in the process of reshaping?

Supplies:

- Plasticine®, nondrying modeling clay, or Play Dough
- paper or plastic plates to serve as base for clay
- (optional) recipe for Play Dough, <http://www.playdoughrecipe.com/>



- 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.

Distribute plates and Plasticine® or clay. Invite children to experiment with it. Keeping the clay on their plates, encourage them to make something out of the material. Admire the children’s creations, and then ask them to let go of those ideas and try shaping something new. Do this several times. Note that although each of them has the same piece of Plasticine® or clay that they had in the beginning, it has been reshaped into something different. Explain that down through the ages the Christian church has constantly been reshaped into something new as people learned more about God’s love and following Jesus. Tell about some of the changes in the church that have occurred during your lifetime. Ask:

- What do you like about our faith community?
- What things about our church could be reshaped?
- How might we reshape the church to make it more welcoming to others?

Ask the children to mold their Plasticine® or clay into shapes or symbols of change. Display the sculptures where all can enjoy them.

3 Everybody Birthday Party

Leader preparation: Decorate the learning area with party decorations. Prepare party games for the children to play. (If you need ideas, go online to <http://www.partygameideas.com/kids-games/>.) Set out supplies for decorating cupcakes.

Supplies:

- unfrosted cupcakes
- small birthday candles
- matches or lighter
- frosting, knives
- edible cupcake decorations
- party decorations
- lively party music
- any supplies needed for party games

Welcome the children with lively music playing and a learning area festooned with party decorations. Explain that you are going to have an “everybody birthday” party. Play a few party games, and then invite children to wash their hands before frosting and decorating their cupcakes. As they frost their cupcakes, invite children to talk about how birthdays are celebrated in their families. Ask:

- What special birthday traditions do you have in your family?
- What food do you eat on your birthday?
- What do you like best about birthdays?

Ask children to recall birthday celebrations they had when they were much younger:

- How have your celebrations changed over the years?
- Why do you think they have changed?

Together talk about how some birthday traditions change in order to keep up with the children’s growth. Some traditions are let go, because they just aren’t meaningful anymore. This happens in life and also in church. Place a birthday candle in each cupcake, light the candles, and lead the children in a rousing chorus of “Happy Birthday.” Invite children to eat their cupcakes. Finish your time together by giving thanks for the blessing of celebrations that change and grow as we do.



Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 Questions and Answers (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Acts 10:1–48 and consider your own responses to the discussion questions in the activity below. What fresh insights about blessing and letting come to you? What new challenges emerge from your study?

Supplies:

- Bible

Help children form pairs or groups of three. Explain that you will read the Bible story of Cornelius and Peter in sections. After each section, you will ask a question that each group will discuss. Then you will mix up the groups before going on to the next section of the story.

Read aloud Acts 10:1–8. Explain that Peter was one of the disciples who had traveled with Jesus. Ask the small groups to discuss: *Why do you think God wanted Cornelius to speak to Peter?*

Mix up the small groups. Read aloud Acts 10:9–14. Explain that Peter was Jewish, and according to the Jewish law he was not allowed to eat the animals that he saw in his vision. They were considered unclean, which meant that anyone who ate them would be unclean. This meant they would be separated from God's love until they went through a purification ritual. Ask the small groups to discuss this question: *How does it feel when someone asks you to break the rules?*

Mix up the small groups. Read aloud Acts 10:15–16. Explain that God was telling Peter that despite what the Jewish law said, those animals were clean because God had made them. Ask the small groups to discuss this question: *How does it feel when you realize that something you had once believed is now considered wrong?*

Mix up the small groups. Read aloud Acts 10:17–23. Explain that Peter was Jewish and that Cornelius and his household were Gentiles, not Jewish. According to Jewish law, Gentiles were unclean. A Jewish person was not allowed to invite Gentiles into his or her home. Ask the small groups to discuss these questions: *Why do you think Peter invited Cornelius's servants into the house? How do you think Peter's vision helped him make that decision?*

Mix up the small groups. Read aloud Acts 10:25–33. Recall that, normally, Peter and Cornelius would not have met. Marvel at the amazing way that Peter and Cornelius were brought together. Ask the small groups to discuss these questions: *How does it feel when something amazing happens? What do you think Peter will say to Cornelius and his household?*

Mix up the small groups. Read aloud Acts 10:34–41. Explain that in this story, God asked Peter to let go of the rules that had prevented Cornelius from hearing the good news about Jesus. Ask the small groups to discuss these questions: *What did Peter risk when he did this? What blessings did Peter bring to Cornelius and his household? How was Peter blessed in return?*

When you have finished the story, gather the entire group in a circle. Ask children to tell anything interesting they learned or discussed. As a group, discuss:



- In what ways is our church welcoming to all?
- Who might not feel welcome at our church?
- What traditions might we have to let go in order to help them feel welcome?



5 Bless This Food

Leader preparation: Set out the supplies for children to make the snack. Print this sentence on newsprint or the whiteboard.

Grace is a loving gift that is neither earned or deserved.

Supplies:

- washed fruit
- knives
- serving plates
- napkins
- newsprint or whiteboard, markers
- “Traditional Table Graces,” Attachment: Activity 5

Invite children to wash their hands and then help you cut up the fruit and arrange it on the serving plates. Before you share the snack, explain that through the ages people have blessed their food before it is eaten. The Bible tells us that Jesus blessed the food before he ate, just as his parents did before him. Christians often call the table blessing a “grace.” In unison, read the definition you printed on the newsprint or whiteboard. Observe that when we say grace, we bless God for all the gifts we have received, especially the food on the table and our family and friends who share in the meal. Invite children to recite any table graces they use in their families. If they don’t know any, use one from the handout “Traditional Table Graces.” Enjoy the snack together. Encourage children to take a copy of the handout with them and use the prayers with their families at mealtime.

6 Creation Praises God

Leader preparation: If you choose Option 1 below, arrange for chaperones. Visit the website “Land Art for Kids,” <http://landartforkids.com/section345249.html>, to learn about land art. Take time to go outside and create some land art as a way of praising God, the Creator. Where and how do you see creation praising God?

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access, monitor or screen
- video: “Creation Calls,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LwGvfdtI2c0>
- Bibles
- digital camera
- for Option 2, a variety of natural objects such as stones, shells, bark, sticks, pine cones, or seed pods

Gather group to watch the video “Creation Calls.” Afterward, ask:

- What part of the video did you find most amazing?
- In what way is God’s creation a blessing to you?

Invite children to tell stories of times they have seen something amazing in nature. Throughout the Bible there are songs of praise written by people who have been inspired by the blessings of God’s creation. Distribute Bibles and ask for volunteers to read aloud Psalm 148. Start with one person reading and then having the other volunteers join in one by one, so that by the end they all are reading.



Invite children to respond to Psalm 148 by creating land art. As is helpful, visit the website “Land Art of Kids” with the children so they can see the pictures and learn more about this art form.

Option 1: If you meet near a suitable park or nature reserve, take the children outside to create their land art. Take photographs, so that the children can have a record of their work.

Option 2: Provide natural objects for the children to create their sculptures indoors. Because the sculptures are not permanent, you may wish to take pictures of their work.

If you like, work together to create a display or presentation of your photos with some of the words of Psalm 148.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Go with a Blessing (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Look through the hymnal or book of worship that your church uses and select one of the prayers of blessing used by your community. If you do not have a worship book, use 2 Corinthians 13:13. If possible, memorize the prayer, so that you can make eye contact with the children while you are saying it.

Supplies:

- book of worship or hymnal used by your church

Gather in a circle and ask the children to tell you what they know about prayers of blessing. As necessary, explain that a prayer of blessing asks God to be present in someone’s life, calls on God to offer love and care, and/or announces God’s protection and guidance. Explain that many churches, including your own, say prayers of blessing at the end of the worship service.

Extend one hand, palm down, in the middle of the circle and invite each child in turn to place a hand on top until everyone has a hand in the pile. Explain that you will say the prayer of blessing used by your church and finish with these words: “And all God’s people say . . .” At that point everyone will lift their hands high in the air and say, “Amen!” Practice the ending a few times, and then ask for a moment of quiet. When you have everyone’s attention, say the prayer of blessing that you selected earlier, trying to make eye contact with every child in the group. Finish with a rousing “Amen,” as practiced!



8 Nighttime Blessings

Leader preparation: Think about your bedtime routine. Going to sleep is a way of letting go and turning things over to God for the night. Write a nighttime prayer of blessing for yourself.

Supplies:

- a white or light-colored pillowcase for each child (volunteers might be willing to sew these for you)
- permanent markers or fabric paint pens
- cardboard (cut up corrugated boxes or cereal boxes)
- “Bedtime Blessings,” Attachment: Activity 8



Give each learner a copy of the handout “Bedtime Blessings.” Ask for volunteers to read the paragraphs aloud, and discuss the questions together.

Give each child a pillowcase and a piece of cardboard to slip inside it to prevent markers from bleeding through. Invite children to use permanent markers or fabric pens to write a bedtime prayer on their pillowcases. Children can add decorative designs around the prayer or on the other side of the pillowcase. Follow label directions for helping fabric pens to set. Encourage children to use their pillowcases on their beds as a reminder that God is always close to them.



9 St. Francis and the Birds

Leader preparation: Display the artwork where the children can easily view it.

Supplies:

- artwork: “St. Francis of Assisi Preaching to the Birds” by Giotto di Bondone, <http://www.art.com/products/p11724653-sa-i1350212/giotto-di-bondone-st-francis-of-assisi-preaching-to-the-birds.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=b2c89647ba56409d894161743bb14f5d&searchstring=st.+francis+feeding+the+birds>
- “St. Francis and the Birds,” Attachment: Activity 9
- small (about 2” × 3”) speech bubbles cut from paper
- reusable adhesive
- Bible

Look at the artwork together and invite children to talk about the painting. Allow time for them to discuss whatever features of it are interesting to them. Invite the group to make up a story about the painting by asking:

- Who might the people in the painting be?
- What do you think they are doing?
- What might they be saying?

Distribute copies of the handout “St. Francis and the Birds,” and ask for volunteers to read aloud the story of St. Francis. Invite children’s comments and thoughts about the story. Read aloud Psalm 148. Together discuss in what ways this psalm reminds you of the story of St. Francis.

Reflect

What new insights about this faith practice did you and the children discover through these activities? How can you continue to support the children as they explore what it means to bless and let go? In what ways did you sense the Spirit talking to you through the questions and comments of the children?

Draw attention back to the artwork. Recall that to St. Francis, it seemed that the birds were praising God. Ask: *If you could use a bird translator, what words of praise might we hear these birds saying?*

Explain that the Bible talks about the whole of creation praising God. Ask: *If we had a nature translator, what words of praise might the sky, the grass, or the tree be saying?*

Distribute speech bubbles cut from paper, and invite children to choose one animal, person, or object of nature in the picture and imagine what it might be saying as it praises God. Have them print the words on speech bubbles and attach the bubbles to the artwork with reusable adhesive.



Attachment: Activity 1

Paper Weaving

To see illustrations of this activity, go to "Paper Weaving" on the First Palette website, www.firstpalette.com/Craft_themes/Colors/Paper_Weaving/Paper_Weaving.html.

Supplies:

- a piece of construction paper cut in a square approximately 9" x 9"
- scissors
- ruler
- construction paper in a variety of colors
- pens or pencils

How to work:

1. Draw a 1-inch border on all four sides of the paper
2. Fold in half the square piece of construction paper.
3. Use the ruler to help draw straight lines from the fold to the border on the edge of the paper. Draw the lines about 1 inch apart.
4. Cut along the lines from the fold to the border. Make sure to keep at least a 1-inch border on all sides of the paper.
5. Using other colors of construction paper cut strips that are 1-inch wide. These are the weaving strips.
6. On one strip, write the word "tradition" over and over. On another strip, write the word "rules" over and over. You will use these two strips in your weaving.
7. Open the folded paper, and weave each paper strip over and under each cut.
8. On one strip, write the words "new ways" over and over. On another strip, write the words "all are welcome" over and over.



Traditional Table Graces

God is great, and God is good.
Bless and thank God for this food.

Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest,
and let this food to us be blessed.

Blessed are you, our God, King of the Universe,
who brings forth bread from the earth.

For health and strength and daily bread,
We praise Thy name, O Lord.

Thank you for the world so sweet.
Thank you for the food we eat.
Thank you for the birds that sing.
Thank you, God, for everything.



Attachment: Activity 8

Bedtime Blessings

Being able to sleep and rest is a blessing from God. It helps our bodies grow and gives us energy for the next day. Going to sleep is a way to let go of all the things that happened during the day.

What bedtime routines do you have?

What special techniques do you have for falling asleep?

What kinds of things might keep children from going to sleep?

Many people pray before they go to sleep. It's a special time to talk with God about all of the good and worrisome parts of the day.

Why might praying at bedtime be a helpful thing to do?

What might you talk to God about before you fall asleep?

A Prayer of Blessing (based on Zephaniah 3:17)

May the Almighty God,
who takes great delight in you,
quiet you with holy love
and give you rest this night. Amen.



Attachment: Activity 8 *(Continued)*

A Prayer from the Hymn “Go, My Children, with My Blessing”

Go, my children, with my blessing, never alone.
Waking, sleeping, I am with you, you are my own.

A Verse from the Psalms (Psalm 4:8)

In peace I will lie down and sleep,
for you alone, Lord,
make me dwell in safety.

Traditional Bedtime Prayer

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
Be with me through the dark of night,
and wake me in the morning light.

**Attachment: Activity 9**

St. Francis and the Birds

Based on St. Bonaventure's Life of St. Francis

Brother Francis was a follower of Jesus. He had spent many years traveling the countryside and teaching others about God's love. One day he realized that he was getting older and that he was a little tired. He wondered if he should retire. He thought and thought, but he just couldn't decide. He wasn't sure what God wanted him to do.

Brother Francis thought that his good friends Brother Sylvester and Sister Clare might be able to help him, so he sent messages to them, asking what they thought he should do. Both friends sent messages to Brother Francis, telling him to keep on sharing God's love with others. Without a second thought, Brother Francis jumped up and headed out the door.

As he was walking down the road, Francis came to a large flock of birds. There were all kinds of birds sitting together in the field. Brother Francis walked over to the birds and started talking to them about God. Now, usually, birds will fly away when someone comes near to them, but these birds sat and listened to Brother Francis. He told them how much God cared for them. He told them that God had given them wings and feathers of beautiful colors, pure air to fly in, and plenty of food to eat. Francis told them that because of all of this, they should praise God in every way they could. The birds were so happy to hear what Brother Francis was saying that they stretched out their necks, opened and closed their beaks, and flapped their wings. It was just like they were clapping their hands and saying "amen!" As long as Brother Francis talked, the birds stayed and listened to him. They didn't fly away until he raised his hand, saying a final prayer and giving them permission to leave.

Brother Francis returned to his friends, who were waiting by the road. He looked at them and said, "How silly of me not to have thought about preaching to the birds before now."

From then on Brother Francis would take the time to share God's word with all of God's creation, telling all creatures to praise and love God, who made us all.

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Age Group

Most children at this stage of development are somewhat unaware of the context in which they live. They are slowly developing the thought processes that allow them to see things from other people's perspectives. Generally speaking, though, they see the world through the filter of "me." Even young children, however, are capable of empathy, imagination, and compassion. They need encouragement, support, and challenges to let go of their own wants in order to show love and care in the world. This Exploration calls the children to look beyond their immediate lives and start thinking about what they can do on a daily basis to share God's love and blessing in the world.

About this Exploration

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



BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Genesis 12:1–5
Romans 15:22–29

Leader Preparation

This Exploration invites you to examine your life. How can you discern when you need to let go of those things that impede your journey? What things make you truly blessed? How is Jesus calling you to live? What values and attitudes are reflected in your lifestyle choices? What might you have to leave behind in order to go forward as a giver and receiver of true blessing?

Prayer: God of love, give me discernment and wisdom as I prepare to lead the children in this Exploration. Help me guide them in looking beyond themselves to the needs of the world around them. Give me courage to leave behind those things that hinder my journey as I seek to find creative ways of sharing your blessings with others. 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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Reader’s Theater (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Think about the material possessions in your life. When do possessions get in the way of your walk with God? What might you need to let go?

Supplies:

- “The Parable of the Foolish Farmer,” Attachment: Activity 1

Set the scene for the parable by explaining that Jesus told this story while traveling and teaching crowds of people how to follow in God’s ways. Distribute copies of “The Parable of the Foolish Farmer,” and ask for volunteers to read the various parts. Everyone can contribute as part of the chorus. Give children time to read through their parts, and then have them present the story. If the group enjoys this activity, they may want to read it through a second time. Ask:

- What does it mean to be greedy? Who was greedy in the story?
- How did the farmer’s greed get in the way of God’s blessing?
- What else could the farmer have done with the extra grain? How would that have brought blessing to the farmer and to others?
- What does this story teach you about letting go and blessing others?
- How do you know when you have enough?
- How might our lives be different if we concentrated on giving instead of getting?

If you have time, you might invite the group to rewrite the story with a different ending. For example, what might happen if the farmer had let go of the extra grain and used it to bring blessings to others?

2 Two Sides of the Coin

Leader preparation: Take note of the blessings in your life this week. Rejoice that you can participate in both the giving and receiving of God’s blessing and love.

Supplies:

- coin for each child
- paper
- pens

God blesses each one of us through creation and through the love and care we receive from others. Ask: *In what ways do you experience God’s blessing?*

Just as we can receive blessings, so we can also be a blessing to others and to God’s creation. Ask: *In what ways might you be a blessing to others?*

Give each child a piece of paper. Have children fold their sheets in half, lengthwise, to make two columns. At the top of one column have them print “I am blessed when . . .” At the top of the other column have them print “I am a blessing when . . .” Invite children to fill in the columns, encouraging them to share ideas.



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.

Distribute coins and invite children to flip them back and forth several times. Make the observation that just as every coin has two sides, so do many of our life experiences. One side of our lives involves receiving blessings, and the other side involves being a blessing to others. Blessing and being blessed are two sides of the same coin. Every day we can experience both sides. Invite children to take a coin and keep it in a pocket as a reminder that they are blessed to be a blessing.



3 Bottle Composters

Leader preparation: Take time to name the blessings you receive from the land. How might you bless the land in return?

Supplies:

- fresh fruits and/or vegetables
- paring knives
- plates
- large bowl, spoon
- small plastic sandwich bags
- small paper bag for each child
- a clean plastic milk jug (½ gallon or quart) with lid for each child
- sharp scissors
- “Activating Bottle Composter,” Attachment: Activity 3
- (optional) computer with Internet access

Have children wash their hands and help prepare a fruit or vegetable as a snack. Place peelings and scraps into a large bowl. As you enjoy the snack, have conversation about the ways the food from the land is a blessing to us. Ask: *How might we bless the land in return?*

If no one says it, mention that one way we can bless the land is to compost the fruit or vegetable scraps and return the rich compost to the soil. Distribute milk jugs and demonstrate how to cut off the top ¼ of the jug with sharp scissors. Also, poke a few holes in the lid with the point of the scissors.

Distribute copies of the attachment and read the instructions together. Encourage children to activate their composters when they get home. Have children place their bottle composters and handouts in paper bags, along with a spoonful of the fruit or vegetable peelings in a sandwich bag.

If you have time, have children to go online to visit <http://yucky.discovery.com/flash/worm/> to find out how composting works.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Going to Canaan (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Divide newspaper into two columns. Print “The Same” at the top of one column and “Different” at the top of the other. You can watch a video of how to fold a five-pointed star at www.5min.com/video/How-to-Fold-a-Five-Point-Star-3892.



Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- “Fold a Star,” Attachment: Activity 4
- copy paper in various colors
- scissors
- pens

Distribute Bibles and have children help one another find Genesis 12:1–5. Ask for a volunteer to read this story aloud. Discuss the story with the group, asking:

- What about Abram and Sarai’s lives are similar to yours?
- What things are different?

Print children’s responses in appropriate columns on the newsprint or whiteboard. Read the resulting chart at the end of the discussion. Explain that we may not think we have much in common with Abram and Sarai, who lived so long ago, but we might be surprised. Every time we have to leave something behind and try something new, we are “going to Canaan.” Every time we say or do something that helps or blesses another person, we are “in Canaan.” Every time we feel a nudge from God to step out of our comfort zones, we are “going to Canaan.” Invite children to tell about times when they have done any of these things.

Later on in Abram and Sarai’s story, God promises them more descendants than there are stars in the sky. Explain that we are all faith descendants of Abram and Sarai, so God’s promise of blessing is on our lives, too.

Distribute paper, scissors, and the attachment “Fold a Star.” Then show children how to fold and cut stars. Have them print “God’s promise of blessing is for you” on each star they make. Have children make extra stars to give away to family and friends who would appreciate the reminder that God is with them.

5 Clothespin Tag

Leader preparation: Think about the material possessions in your life. When do possessions stop being a blessing and become a burden? How can you make the shift from getting to giving?

Supplies:

- spring clothespins
- basket

Give each child three or four clothespins, and invite the children to attach the clothespins to their clothing. On the command “Go,” everyone tries to get rid of their clothespins by pinning them onto the clothes of others. After a few minutes, stop the game, and count the clothespins. The one with the fewest wins.

Gather the group to discuss the game. Make the observation that the object of many games is to get as much of something as you can. Ask:

- How is this like life?
- Why might we want to get more and more stuff, even though we have plenty?
- How do we know when we have enough?



Comment that in the clothespin game, the winner is the one who gives the most away. Ask:

- How would the world be different if everyone concentrated on giving instead of getting?
- How might our lives be different if we concentrated on giving?
- How might that be a blessing to us?
- How might that be a blessing to others?

Drop a clothespin into the basket, and explain that sometimes, in order to share our blessings, we have to let them go. Invite everyone in turn to drop their clothespins into the basket and name one blessing that he or she might let go in order to share that blessing with someone else.

6 Popcorn Blessings

Leader preparation: Eat popcorn as you name the many blessings in your life. How might you pass them on?

Supplies:

- unpopped popcorn kernels
- hot-air popcorn popper
- serving bowl
- resealable plastic bags
- cups to act as scoops
- Bibles

Distribute Bibles and ask learners to help one another find Romans 15:22–29. Read these verses aloud as children follow along. Describe a blessing as something good we experience in our lives. Challenge children to identify the blessings named in the passage. Explain that in his letters, the apostle Paul often named his blessings and encouraged followers of Jesus to do the same.

Show the children the popcorn kernels. Invite them to tell about times they have had fun popping corn and eating it. Sometimes counting blessings is a little like popping corn. At first you will think of just a few blessings, but once you get going, you think of more and more. Use a hot-air popper to pop the corn. As it pops, invite children to name blessings they experience in their lives. Watch the corn flow into the bowl, and demonstrate delight in the way that God’s blessings overflow in our lives. Invite children to scoop popcorn into bags and seal them. Have each child take one bag, and then discuss what you might do with the excess. Ask: *How can we pass on this blessing to others?*

Maybe you could give the extra bags of popcorn to another class or have children take them home to share with a friend.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Go With a Blessing (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Locate a copy of the hymn “Go, My Children, with My Blessing” and read the words. What would it be like to hear God saying these words to you? Familiarize yourself with the tune.



Supplies:

- song: “Go, My Children, with My Blessing” by Jaroslav J. Vajda (tune: Ar Hyd Y Nos), <http://rockhay.tripod.com/worship/music/gomychild.htm> \
- (optional) computer with Internet access, monitor or screen

Invite the children to listen to the words to a song. Have them close their eyes and listen, imagining God is talking to them and not you talking. Slowly read the lyrics to “Go, My Children, with My Blessing” giving the children time to absorb the meaning. Ask:

- What did you hear in the words?
- How might you “grow in love and love by serving?”

Sing the song together, or listen to it on the video as a prayer of blessing for the group.

8 Letting Go and Blessing with Kiva

Leader preparation: Learn about the Kiva organization at its website (<http://www.kiva.org/>) so that you will be able to guide the children through the activity. Consider how you might raise \$25 to open an account for the group.

Supplies:

- computer with Internet access, monitor or screen
- printer with paper

Many countries do not have the same financial blessings that many North Americans experience every day. In some places, it is difficult for people to make a living. Being able to get a loan to start or expand a business is nearly impossible. Some organizations are trying to help people get the resources they need to start businesses and make their dreams come true. Go to the website for Kiva and invite children to explore it. Start by watching the video “How Kiva Works,” at <http://www.kiva.org/about/how>. Have children look at some of the different profiles. Challenge them to consider how they might raise \$25. Explain that giving money to help someone is a way of passing on God’s blessing to others. Ask:

- What could we give up in order to raise \$25?
- If once a week for four weeks we all let go of one chocolate bar, or a bag of chips, or a soda, or a meal from a fast food restaurant and saved that money, how much could we raise?

Once the money has been raised, invite children to choose a recipient, and help the children open an account. Print the loan recipient’s profile and post it in your gathering space, so that the group can keep that person in prayer. This activity can be repeated as the loan is repaid.

9 Random Acts of Blessing

Leader preparation: Think about a time when you were the recipient of a simple act of blessing. Remember how good it felt. What simple things might you do each day to bring blessing to others? Preview the video “Free Hugs.”

Supplies:

- computer with Internet connection, monitor or screen
- video: “Free Hugs,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vr3xRRJdd4&feature=youtu.be>



- Hershey chocolate Hugs
- cardstock
- small plastic bags
- stapler
- small, self-adhesive stickers

Gather the group and ask:

- How much difference can a hug make?
- When do you need a hug?
- When do you give hugs?
- How might a hug be a blessing?

Reflect

Where did you and the children see signs of God's blessing today? In what ways are the children learning that they can be a blessing to others? How did the children show their understanding that sometimes they may need to let go of their wants in order to be a blessing to others?

On June 30, 2004, Juan Mann began offering hugs in a shopping mall in Australia. For months, Mann had been feeling depressed and lonely, until one night at a party when he received a random hug from a stranger. According to Mann, that one act of random kindness made him feel like a king. Mann recalls, "It was greatest thing that ever happened." Watch the video "Free Hugs." Allow time after the video for children to share their comments and observations. Remind children that they should not hug strangers unless their parents are with them. Have some discussion about what else you might do, such as smile or speak kindly, to lift someone's spirits.

Have the children make tiny treat bags. Fill a small zipper-locking plastic bag with Hershey chocolate Hugs candies. Decorate a construction paper note and staple the note over the bag's zipper. Invite the children to take a few bags home to hand out to friends or family members who need some encouragement. As you work, encourage children to talk about how they might perform other random acts of blessing and encouragement.



Attachment: Activity 1

The Parable of the Foolish Farmer

Based on Luke 12:13–21

Narrator 1: Jesus told a story.

Narrator 2: To warn his followers about the dangers of greed.

Chorus: Uh-oh—not greed!

Narrator 1: Once there was a farmer whose land produced a good harvest.

Narrator 2: The soil of his land was good, so his crops grew faster than everyone else's.

Narrator 3: And at harvest time he gathered in lots more grain than anyone else.

Chorus: Lucky man!

Narrator 1: The farmer thought about what to do with the harvest.

Narrator 2: He filled his barn, his shed, and even his bathtub.

Narrator 3: But still there was grain left over.

Chorus: What to do? What to do?

Voice 1: Could you share some grain with people who need food?



Attachment: Activity 1 (Continued)

Farmer: No, that grain is all mine!

Voice 2: So, what will you do?

Farmer: I will pull down my old barn and build a bigger, better barn. Then I will have enough room for all *my* grain.

Narrator 1: So, that's what he did.

Narrator 2: He tore down his old barn.

Narrator 3: And built a splendid new one.

Chorus: Oh-h-h!

Narrator 1: But there still wasn't enough room for all the grain the farmer had harvested.

Chorus: What to do? What to do?

Voice 1: Could you share some grain with people who need food?

Farmer: No, that grain is all mine!

Narrator 1: So, what will you do?

Farmer: I will pull down my barn and build the most magnificent barn the world has ever seen. Then I will have enough room for all *my* grain.

Narrator 1: So, that's what he did.

Narrator 2: He tore down his new barn.

Attachment: Activity 1 (Continued)

Narrator 3: And built the most enormous,

Narrator 1: Massive,

Narrator 2: Gigantic,

Narrator 3: Gargantuan barn anyone had ever seen.

Chorus: Whoa, what a barn!

Narrator 1: The farmer put all the grain into his new barn.

Narrator 2: I see that you have done well. Now you can take it easy and enjoy life.

Narrator 3: But that very night,

Narrator 1: The farmer died.

Narrator 2: Just like that.

Narrator 3: And he never did get to enjoy his harvest.

Chorus: Poor man.

Narrator 1: When you spend your time worrying about what you have,

Narrator 2: Instead of how God wants you to live,

Narrator 3: You get nothing.

Chorus: In God's eyes, you are poor.



Attachment: Activity 3

Activating Bottle Composter

Supplies:

- a clean plastic milk jug ($\frac{1}{2}$ gallon or quart) with lid
- sharp scissors
- soil
- fruit or vegetable scraps such as peelings and cores, coffee ground, grass clippings, and so forth
- spray bottle or mister
- shredded paper
- tape

How to work:

1. Cut off about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch of the top of the bottle.
2. Poke some holes in the lid.
3. Place about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch of soil in the bottom of the bottle. Mist with water. Add a handful of shredded paper.
4. Fill the bottle up with layers of fruit and vegetable scraps, old leaves, soil, grass clippings, coffee grinds or sawdust. Mist each layer with water.
5. Tape the top back on the bottle.
6. Place the bottle in a warm place, such as a sunny windowsill.
7. Each day over the next month check the composter and note the changes you see.
8. When the ingredients have broken down into a brown crumbly mix remove the bottle top and add the contents to the garden.

Trouble shooting:

- If the contents look slimy, the mixture is too wet. Remove the top for a few days.
- If the contents look dry and nothing seems to be happening, the mixture is too dry. Remove the lid, mist the contents with water, and replace the lid.



Attachment: Activity 4

Fold a Star

For a video of how to fold a five-pointed star, go to www.5min.com/video/How-to-Fold-a-Five-Point-Star-3892.

Supplies:

- 8½" × 11" piece of paper
- scissors

How to work:

1. With the paper in the landscape position, fold a piece of 8½" × 11" paper in half short side to short side, and crease firmly.
2. Mark the halfway point on the bottom of the paper.
3. Bring the top left-hand corner to the halfway mark on the bottom of the paper, and crease the fold. This forms a triangle in the lower left corner of the paper.
4. Fold the triangle up along the edge of the paper, and crease firmly.
5. Fold the top portion behind the triangle, and crease firmly.
6. Make a diagonal cut from the corner of the first triangle to the midpoint of the opposite side of the triangle.
7. Unfold your star.

Blessing and Letting Go



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Age Group

Children in this age group tend to think of the future in terms of tomorrow, or maybe next week, rather than years from now. Some of them may be starting to think about what they might like to do when they grow up, but children of this age usually live very comfortably in the present. They are blessed with the gift of an active imagination—aware enough to want a better world and free enough not to be limited by what is thought to be possible. Activities in this Exploration will engage that imagination and affirm that as they move into the future, they can let go of their fears because God will be with them. They will be assured that they can make a difference and that even small actions can bring wonderful blessings into the lives of others.

About this Exploration

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



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

Leader Preparation

What are your visions of the future? How do they affect the way you live out your faith each day? Do you have any fears or anxieties? Where do you find hope? Read Jeremiah 29:1-14 and think about Jeremiah's words to the people in exile. How do they speak to you in your particular situation? Where do you find blessing and hope in your day-to-day life? How does that strengthen you to move into the future?

Prayer: Loving God, as I lead the activities in this Exploration, help me come to a deeper understanding that my future is held safely in your hands. Help me to let go of my anxieties and recognize your blessings in the present. 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.

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Imagine the World Quilt (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Cover a bulletin board with a dark color of construction paper. Spend time imagining what the world would look like if everyone let go of his or her own agenda and followed God's. What changes would you have to make in your own life?

Supplies:

- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- crayons or colored pencils
- 8½" squares of white paper
- fine-tipped markers
- stapler or thumbtacks
- bulletin board
- dark colored of construction paper
- Bible

Tell the story of when the Israelites were defeated by enemy soldiers and carried off as prisoners, or exiles, to the country of Babylonia. Explain that the Bible includes a message that God had the prophet Jeremiah deliver to these Israelites living in a foreign land. Ask a volunteer to read aloud Jeremiah 29:4-7. Form pairs, and ask each pair to summarize God's message to the exiles in one sentence. Print these sentences on newsprint or whiteboard. If no one else mentions it, say that God's message to the Israelites was about more than caring for themselves and their own families. Jeremiah told them to care for the community where they had been taken to live. Ask:

- In what ways might we work for the good of our community?
- In what ways might we work for the good of our world?

Print children's suggestions on newsprint or white board. Ask children to think about what the world would be like if everyone let go of fighting and selfishness and worked for the good of others. Invite each learner to use fine-tipped markers to draw what this world would look like on a square of white paper. Staple or tack the finished squares to the bulletin board to create a community quilt, leaving a margin of backing paper between each square. You may want to leave some art supplies nearby and invite members of your faith community to add squares to the quilt.



2 Winds of Change

Leader preparation: Print each of the following Bible references on a separate index card:

- Isaiah 43:1-2
- Joshua 1:9
- Psalms 139:5

Display the artwork where the children can see it. Place yourself in "Sisters in the Wind," and listen to the wind. What is the Spirit whispering about the blessings that the future holds for you? What might you need to let go in order to move forward into the blessings God has in store for you?



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

Supplies:

- Bibles
- artwork: “Sisters in the Wind” by Ethan Hubbard, https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1102072326?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15626&store_id=1401
- CD with wind sounds, or recording at <http://soundbible.com/1810-Wind.html>
- CD player or laptop to play wind recording
- index cards
- pens

Gather children where they can see the artwork and ask them to sit quietly and look at it. After a few quiet moments, use the following questions to initiate conversation and invite discussion.

- What feeling words would you use to describe this picture?
- What do you think is going on in this picture?

Explain that this is a picture of two sisters in Australia. They are living in make-shift camps while they make a journey across the country with their family. Ask children to imagine that the two sisters are looking forward to their future.

- What do you think they see?
- What might they miss about their previous life?
- What hopes might they have?

Invite children to close their eyes and use their imaginations to join the sisters in the picture. Ask them to look forward to their future and think about what it might be like. Play the wind sounds, and afterward let the silence gather for a few moments. Ask:

- When you looked forward to your future, what did you think about?
- What do you think will change?
- What will you need to leave behind?
- What hopes do you have?
- What blessings might you experience?
- What worries do you have about the future?

Form three groups. Give each group a Bible and index card. Challenge them to look up the verse and find a creative way to present it. They might create movements or actions to accompany the words, read it with rhythm, or use different voices to add dramatic effect. Allow time for practice, then gather together and have each group make its presentation. Ask: *How might these verses help people let go of their worries about the future?*

Invite children to choose which of the three Bible verses is most meaningful to them and copy it on an index card to take home.

3 Ice Cream

Leader preparation: Think about a time you had to let go of one thing in order to make way for another. What blessings have you experienced as a result of this journey? How have these changes deepened your relationship with God?



Supplies:

- Bible
- 2 cups heavy whipping cream
- ½ cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- crushed ice cubes
- rock salt
- quart-sized resealable plastic bag
- gallon-sized resealable plastic bag
- small bowls
- spoons

Recall the story of the Israelites who long ago were defeated by enemy soldiers and carried off as prisoners, or exiles, to the country of Babylonia. Explain that the Bible includes a message that God had the prophet Jeremiah deliver to these exiles. Read aloud Jeremiah 29:4–11. Ask:

- What did God want the people to do?
- What blessings would they experience as a result?
- What did they need to let go in order to make way for this new life?

Explain that sometimes in life we must let go of one thing to make way for another. At times it can feel as if our whole life has been shaken up; at times like that we need patience and persistence to make the change. Eventually, however, we will experience the sweetness of God’s blessing.

Invite the children to shake things up and change a liquid into a solid, but tell them they will need patience and persistence. Promise that if they follow the change through to the end, something sweet will appear. Follow these instructions to make ice cream.

1. Combine cream, sugar, and vanilla in a quart-sized bag.
2. Carefully press out as much air as possible, and seal the bag.
3. Partially fill a gallon bag with crushed ice cubes, and then add about 1 cup of rock salt.
4. Place the sealed bag with cream mixture inside the ice bag and seal.
5. Invite children to take turns shaking the bag vigorously. It will take about 15 minutes for ice cream to form.
6. Serve and enjoy.

Note: If you have a large group, make one bag of ice cream for every six children.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Double Bubble (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read Jeremiah 29:1–14. This message was originally sent to a hurting people struggling to let go of the only way of life they had known. How does it inform your practice of blessing and letting go?

Supplies:

- large playing area
- broom stick



Have children form pairs. Invite each pair to decide on a way to move together, such as hopping on one foot, skipping, bumping hips, and so on. Give children a short time to move around the playing area performing their various actions, and then call out “Double Bubble!” Each person must let go of his or her partner, find a new one, and decide on a new way of moving. If you have an uneven number of children, provide a broomstick as an impromptu partner. The game is over when the children cannot find a new partner. To finish the game, shout out “Pop!”

Gather the group and discuss the game by asking:

- What changes did you experience in the game?
- What was it like to give up one thing and move onto another?
- How is this game like life?
- What changes do you think you will make as you grow older?
- What changes do you think our church might have to make in order to share God’s love?

5 Apple Prints

Leader preparation: Wash and dry the fabric. Tape it to a surface covered with waxed paper. Cut an apple in half and trace around the halves on thin kitchen sponges (and then eat the apple!). Make one of these sponge apple shapes for each child. Pour paint into paper plates. On a sheet of newsprint or a whiteboard, print this quotation:

Anyone can count the seeds in an apple, but only God can count the number of apples in a seed.

—Robert H. Schuller

Supplies:

- marker and newsprint or whiteboard
- 1 yard of unbleached cotton fabric
- waxed paper
- tape
- red and green acrylic paint
- paper plates
- paper towels
- apple, sharp knife
- thin kitchen sponges
- sharp scissors
- 3’ dowel rod
- yarn
- permanent markers
- (optional) apples (one for each pair of children), sharp knife, cutting board, napkins

Cut apples in half, and give each child a piece on a napkin. Ask them to look carefully at the piece of apple as you read aloud the saying on the newsprint or whiteboard. Invite children to tell you what they think this quotation means. Explain that we can all count the number of seeds in an apple, but only God knows the future of every seed. Like the apple seed, we go into the future knowing that there are many changes ahead, but our future is in God’s hands. Take a moment for learners to eat and enjoy the apples.



Use a permanent marker to print the Robert Schuller saying on the banner. Have children use the prepared sponges to make apple prints around the words by dipping the sponge shape in paint and pressing it on the fabric. When the banner is dry, fold the top of the fabric over the dowel and glue the edge to form a sleeve. Tie braided yarn to ends of the dowel for hanging. Hang the banner in your meeting space or a hallway at your church.

6 One Thousand Paper Cranes

Leader preparation: Learn how to fold a paper crane from this video or website:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=es-vMeZy9HA&feature=youtu.be>
<http://monkey.org/~aidan/origami/crane/>

Make sure you can demonstrate the technique to the children. Familiarize yourself with the story of Sadako using the information at website in the Supplies list. Prepare to tell the story to the children.

Supplies:

- origami paper
- website: the story of Sadako and the paper cranes, <http://www.globalministries.org/resources/youth-and-children/fold-paper-cranes-for-peace.html>

Tell the story of Sadako and the paper cranes. Eventually Sadako's story inspired the creation of the Children's Peace Movement. In the Hiroshima Peace Garden, there is a bronze statue, topped with a figure of a girl holding a folded crane. At the foot of the statue are these words: "This is our cry. This is our prayer. Peace on earth." Each year, children and adults from all over the world travel to the Children's Peace Monument, bringing their own folded paper cranes in memory of Sadako and as a symbol of their desire for peace. Ask:

- How is peace a blessing?
- What things would the world have to give up in order to live peacefully?

Distribute origami paper, and have children print and complete the following sentence on the back of the paper: "I will give up _____ for peace." Show children how to fold a paper crane. Give them additional paper to continue folding cranes at home. As you work, talk about the things they might do at home or school or in the community to encourage and promote the blessing of peace. Encourage them to place a paper crane where they will see it daily as a reminder to live in ways that bring peace.

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Baby Blessing (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Spend a quiet moment recalling the times you and your church have welcomed a new child into your community. What did you do?

Supplies:

- Bibles
- "Welcoming and Blessing Babies," Attachment: Activity 7
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard



- paper
- pens
- crayons or colored pencils
- envelopes

Invite children to tell about their experiences of meeting a new baby for the first time. Explain that the arrival of a new baby is a blessing, and people around the world have different ways of welcoming these new arrivals. Distribute copies of the handout “Welcoming and Blessing Babies,” and give learners a moment to read about some of these traditions. Ask them to tell which traditions on the sheet seem most like their own communities and which seem most different.

Distribute Bibles and have children help one another find Luke 2:22. Explain that when Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph followed the customs of their Jewish faith to welcome their new son. Ask for volunteers to read aloud Luke 2:22–34. Ask:

- How did Mary and Joseph welcome Jesus?
- What did Simeon’s prayer say about Jesus?
- In what ways did Simeon’s prayer bless Mary and Joseph?

As a group, write a simple prayer of blessing that could be prayed over a new baby. To guide your work, ask the following questions.

- What do we want God to do for the new babies?
- What blessings do we want these babies to experience?
- What do we wish in the future for these babies?

Work together to compose the prayer on newsprint or a whiteboard, making corrections as the group sees fit. If necessary, make a good copy of the final prayer. Distribute paper and invite children to print a copy of the prayer in the center of the paper. Have them use crayons or colored pencils to create a decorative border. Place each prayer in an envelope and make arrangements for an envelope to be given to the parents of each newborn in your church.

8 Asperges Blessing

Leader preparation: In some churches, branches of evergreen shrubs or trees (or special brushes) are dipped in water. After saying a prayer of blessing over the water, the branches are dipped in the water and then waved over the heads of the worshipers, sprinkling them with water. This tradition is called Asperges, which is a Latin word that means “to be sprinkled.” The sprinkling of water is a reminder of the water of baptism. Water is an important part of life for God’s people. It is used for cleansing, a reminder that God loves us and gives us a fresh start whenever we need it. Water is used for drinking, a reminder that God’s love is refreshing and gives us life. Water is used for watering plants, another reminder that God’s love brings new life and growth.

Supplies:

- bowl of water
- small branch of an evergreen shrub or tree

Show children the water and have a brief discussion about the ways they use water. Point out the special meanings that water has for followers of Jesus. Explain the tradition of Asperges. Invite children to work together to compose a prayer



to bless the water. Dip the evergreen branch into the water and wave it over the head of each child, saying: *[Child's name] may God bless you and keep you as you go into the coming week.*

9 The Power of Words

Leader preparation: Make sure you have enough dominoes to create at least two falling domino runs. Dominoes do not set up well on all types of flooring, so experiment with the floors or tabletops available and choose the best location for this activity. Preview the video.

Supplies:

- two sets of dominoes
- computer with Internet Access, monitor or screen
- video: “The Power of Words,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFLgyONK1Pc&feature=related>
- index cards
- pens
- basket

Form two groups, giving each group a set of dominoes to use in creating a falling domino run. When they have experimented with the dominoes for a while, begin a discussion about the way in which the first domino sets off a chain reaction when it is pushed. Invite children to tell about times when something they did set off a chain reaction that had an unexpected consequence. You may want to tell about your own experience to prompt this discussion.

Reflect

Take time to reflect upon your group experience. What discoveries did you and the children make about blessing and letting go? Where did you see God’s blessings in your interaction? Where is the courage to change? When did you see hope for the future expressed during these activities?

Watch the video “The Power of Words.” Discuss the video by asking:

- What kinds of words can inspire hope?
- What words can nurture love?
- How did Jesus use words to encourage and bless others?
- Tell of a time when someone said something to you that made your day.
- How can your words bring blessing to others?

Distribute index cards and have children write messages of encouragement and blessing on them. Place messages in a basket and have each child draw one to take home.



Attachment: Activity 7

Welcoming and Blessing Babies

In many African villages, babies are welcomed with special songs.

In Borneo, a beating drum announces the blessing of a baby's arrival.

In Guatemala, houses are cleaned and candles are lit to welcome a baby to his or her new home.

In the Philippines, some families leave a bamboo box open in the delivery room to catch the baby's first cry.

In Senegal, Muslim families write prayers from the Koran on a piece of paper. The paper is put in water. When it is soaked, a very tiny piece is torn off and placed on a newborn's tongue.

In some Iranian families, a new baby is passed from one person to another around a circle. Each person whispers prayers to Allah in the baby's ears.

In Central America, the baby's grandparents throw a christening party. The guests are given colorful ribbons that have the baby's and godparent's names on them.

In Switzerland, an apple tree is often planted to celebrate the birth of a boy and a nut tree is planted to celebrate the birth of a girl.

In the Netherlands, family and friends come to visit and welcome the new baby. They are given traditional snacks to celebrate the safe arrival of the newborn.

In the Ukraine, many new babies have a red string tied around their wrists until they are baptized.