



Playing & Living Joyfully

About this Faith Practice

In today's world people of all ages need to give themselves permission to play. We believe God seeks to awaken a playful spirit among us. We invite God into this process as we seek recreation and re-creation. While it can lead us into other things, play is inherently its own reward; the experience of playing and living joyfully is – in its essence – pure hope, delight, celebration and song. Playing and living joyfully moves beyond prescribed forms and places. It includes ways of doing justice and moves us outside ourselves into sharing one with another. Joy is contagious; come and play!

Let's Begin...

Now that you've downloaded the files for your faith practice and age group or setting, you can get started planning one or multiple sessions:

1 Open the .pdf file for your age group or setting. Choose an Exploration, the approach you think will help your group to best experience the faith practice. Choose any one of the following Explorations to use for one session:



Discovery



Scripture



Discipleship



Christian Tradition



Context and Mission



Future and Vision

Note: If you're planning multiple sessions, you can follow the order suggested above or feel free to use any order that fits the needs of your group. Some groups may choose to start with Scripture and then see where that leads them. Others may be more ready to act in their community and might want to start with Context and Mission.

2 Locate the Exploration you've chosen



3 Look through all 9 activities and select the ones you would like to do with your group.

- If you're planning a 30–45 minute session, choose 3 activities.
- 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.
- For 45 minutes to 1 hour, choose 4 or 5 activities.

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- For a 1½ to 2-hour session, you can use all 9 activities.

Tip: Look for this symbol  to find activities designed for Easy Preparation (able to be done with minimal preparation using supplies normally found at the church).

- 4 Make copies of any handouts () related to your activities. Order posters () if using art (see “Ordering Posters,” below).

Use of Art, Music, and Scripture in Faith Practices

Faith Practices activities include many opportunities to grow in faith through the use of scripture, music, and art.

Ordering Posters

If you choose activities that use an art image, you or your church will need to purchase posters of the art by clicking on the link provided in the activity. If you wish to use art, you will need to plan ahead, since it takes 1 to 2 weeks for the posters to arrive after you place your order.

Art

Six posters are used with the faith practice Playing and Living Joyfully and may be ordered by clicking on the links provided.

From Imaging the Word Poster Sets:

“Allerheiligen” (All Saints) by Wassily Kandinsky (<http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>)

“Sisters in the Wind” by Ethan Hubbard (<http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>)

“Shotgun, Third Ward #1” by John Biggers (<http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources1>)

From AllPosters.com:

“Children Play in the Old Town of Kabul, Afghanistan” (<http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters10>)

“Joyful Dance” by Diana Ong (<http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters11>)

“Dancing ‘Til Dawn” by Marianne Millar (<http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters12>)

Music

Three music selections are used with Playing and Living Joyfully. We have selected music which is easily found in many hymnals. A web link is provided to give more information about each music selection.

Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You, Tune: Hymn to Joy (<http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong10>)

Say it Sing it, (Sing! Prayer and Praise! #188) (<http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong11>)

Over My Head, Tune: African-American traditional

(Lyrics: <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong12> YouTube: <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong12a>)

Scripture

Twelve Bible passages are used with Playing and Living Joyfully, two with each Exploration.

Discovery	1 John 1:1 – 2:2	Psalm 30
Scripture	Mark: 9:30-37	Philippians 2:1-13
Discipleship	Galatians 4:4-7	Revelation 7:9-17
Christian Tradition	Isaiah 11:1-10	Song of Solomon 2:8-13
Context and Mission	John 12:20-36	Luke 1:39-56
Future and Vision	Mark 16:1-8	Psalm 112

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Playing and Living Joyfully



Exploration: Discovery

About this Age Group

A play-starved group, adult participants have complex responses to this practice of faith. Some may feel they need “permission” to engage in the nonfocused experience of play after years and years of shouldering responsibility. Some may be more comfortable as spectators at live or televised sporting events or as play-partners of children in their families and neighborhoods. Some may struggle with damaging play practices such as gambling addictions or secret electronic gaming during work hours. Some may be comfortable in highly structured play environments—bridge clubs, bingo halls, golf links—but feel awkward at the invitation to swing, paint with watercolor, or fly a kite. For many of them playfulness at church may be deeply suspect. In spite of the complicated history, these busy employed and possibly busier retired folks will be tantalized by the very thought of playing and living creatively. They will be willing—even if self-conscious—to enter the discovery process.

About this Exploration

Playing and living joyfully is a legitimate expression of our connection with the divine. Living in joy does not require a particular time or place. It requires a willingness to divest ourselves of the expectations society has imposed upon us. To uncover holy joy in our lives, we must find a place of centering and spontaneity. We allow ourselves to return to what has been present in us since birth: the innate wonder, abandon, and delight of life in relationship with God.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

**1 John:1-2:2
Psalm 30**

Leader Preparation

Consider the words “play” and “joy” and your personal feelings about them. What is your earliest memory of play? When did you last play? Is there something you did within the last twenty-four hours you can genuinely call “play”?

What is joy for you? Is it “happiness squared” or something unique in nature? Can you remember situations where you have experienced joy? Have you ever felt that you didn’t have the right to joy?

Prayer: God, you who play hide-and-seek with us all our lives, receive my beginning reflections on playing and living joyfully. Help me to recognize that each participant will understand these words differently and contribute different experiences to our gathering. Help me to play fair, play it as it lies, and always listen with my heart. Amen.

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities

 **1 Play As You Go (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: Consider any mobility issues for the group of participants. Place a few adult-sized chairs in each room. If it is winter, pre-set the heat for comfort, especially in the sanctuary.

Supplies:

- flashlight
- Bible

Welcome the group and explain that the faith practice to be explored is “Playing and Living Joyfully.” Share introductions, if necessary, and any prayer concerns if that is a regular part of gathering.

Invite a volunteer to read 1 John 1:1-7. Explain to the participants that you are going to “walk in the light.” (Click on the flashlight and wait for chuckles; use it as a pointer as you proceed.) You will explore by “seeing, hearing, and touching with hands” some of the ways people play.

Walk together into the nursery. Ask and discuss how the children who use this room “play.” Visit the next older classroom and ask again, noting similarities and differences. Use the flashlight to highlight art supplies, if creativity has not yet been named as a form of play. Travel, room by room, allowing participants to free-associate age-appropriate play—video games, Legos, basketball, dress-up—even if it does not occur at church.

Finally invite the group into the sanctuary and ask them how people “play” in this space. Honestly name any resistance to thinking of worship (except possibly for the children’s sermon) as play. Consider whether “serious” and “playful” are opposites or complementary terms.

Conclude in the sanctuary or return to the group’s space to review the exploration and discuss how play can be a valid part of human beings “making our joy complete.” Invite someone to close in prayer or offer these words: God, we thank you for this safe and sacred place, in which all your children play and discover joy. May our church always be faithful and fun, and may our hearts be touched by light and willing to share the joy known in Jesus. Amen.

 **2 Let’s Go Fly a Kite**

Leader preparation: Spend time recollecting early play experiences of your own—your earliest, your favorite solitary play, a memorable game with a friend, your feeling about recess at school. Consider pleasant and not so pleasant memories and pray for God’s grace as people share from childhood—some of them may have had few happy moments. Especially be aware that the most difficult discussion might involve the fact that many perpetrators of unwanted touch dress it up as “play.”

Supplies:

- Bible
- “A Prayer for Play,” Attachment: Activity 2
- a low table in the center of the circle with a colorful cloth and four small votive candles

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

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

- a “classic” toy: a yoyo, a kite, jacks and a ball, marbles, a doll, a Lego creation or Lincoln logs, some matchbox cars, checkers or Candy Land, a metal watercolor set, play dough, and so on (optional)

Invite folks to share an early happy memory of play. Give them examples: “One time I built a sand castle,” “Whenever I wanted to relax as a child, I got out my little loom to make hot pads and stretched the little strings and felt like I could create order in my life,” “One Christmas I was given a sled,” or “We had this old golden retriever who would let us dress her up—she was a horse or a witch . . .” Participants are free to touch the toys on the worship center while they are talking.

Light one candle in thanks for these happy memories and light a second candle for all of those children, some of whom may be in the circle, for whom a happy play memory is hard to recall because of poverty or physical violence or emotional abuse.

Some discussion questions: Why do children play? What does the experience of play accomplish in their lives? What is holy about play . . . or why is it in a “faith practice”?

Then inquire about adult play—what things do adults do to experience what children experience? Is play as necessary or less necessary for adults?

Read together or have a volunteer read Psalm 30:11–12. What is the value of play after loss—for children or for adults?

Light the third candle for all people who need to play after a time of sadness, and the fourth candle for our commitment to holy play in daily life. Close with “A Prayer for Play,” Attachment: Activity 2.



3 Charades—Not Wii, but We

Leader preparation: These physical movements are done seated, but be aware of physical limitations and “stack the deck” to support them.

Supplies:

- Bible
- song: “Say It! Sing It!” Attachment: Activity 3
- index cards, each with a different kind of play that uses large motor movements, such as football, baseball, hula hoop, tennis, bowling, flying a kite, skipping rope, blowing bubbles, blowing up a balloon, throwing dice (prepare more than the anticipated number of participants, so that some can choose a second time)

Distribute index cards for a quick game of charades. Each person pantomimes the play/game on the card. Each of these has distinctive (and easily guessed) large motor movements that can be performed standing or sitting. After the initial round invite a volunteer to read Psalm 150. Go around the circle again with each person saying and pantomiming: Praise God with baseball/ kites/ bubbles, or some other game. The group responds each time: Let everything that breathes praise God.

Suggested questions for discussion:

- a. How is the experience of “full-body praising” different from “head-praising”? When does that happen in church? (Possibly liturgical dance, pageants, mission activities)
- b. Does the play of children glorify God? How about the play of adults?
- c. Have you ever improved your psychological, emotional, or spiritual well-being by physical activity?
- d. What are the distinctions between exercise and play, work and play, rest and play?

Invite the group to sing or read the chorus to “Say It! Sing It!” and discuss the connections between each pair—saying and singing, praying and playing, knowing and showing, and finally breathing and praising. Go around the circle one more time with each participant praying: *Holy God, help me to . . . [choose one] say / sing / pray / play / know / show / praise / just breathe this week. Amen!*

Discerning & Deciding Activities

4 Betting on God, or the Discard Pile (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: In playing and living joyfully there is a temptation to forget balance. Joyful moments contrast with those things we have done that we deeply regret or have left undone that could have made such a difference to others—in other words, sin. 1 John 1:1–2:2 reminds us that discerning the negative side and discarding it is fully a part of learning to “walk in the light.”

Supplies:

- Bibles
- index cards
- pens or pencils
- a worship center with playing cards, face up, of different kinds—regular cards, Uno, Old Maid, or Authors (optional)
- music before session: either “The Gambler” by Kenny Rogers (“You’ve got to know when to hold them, know when to fold them”), <http://www.tinyurl.com/2e62tn2> or “Luck, Be a Lady Tonight,” from *Guys and Dolls* <http://www.tinyurl.com/23zth54> (judge the age and tastes of the group) (optional)

There are a number of card games (Rummy, Canasta, Crazy Eights, and so on) that feature a “discard pile.” The player draws a card and can make a play or not, but must choose a card to discard. Sometimes one player will get “stuck” with the whole discard pile and is, therefore, further away from winning the game. The word “discard,” meaning to get rid of something that is not wanted, comes from card-playing.

Invite the group to read 1 John 1:8–2:2 along with a volunteer. The writer John offers the instructions of this letter so that his “joy may be complete.” Part of that joy is informing all his readers that they are sinners. It seems that understanding the reality of sin is part of understanding the reality of blessing or “walking in the light.” 1 John 1:8–2:2 seems fairly matter of fact: everyone sins; everyone can confess sins. Because of Jesus Christ everyone can discard his or her sins.

Suggested questions for discussion:

- a. What does sin mean to you? For example, is it vast evil deeds or the mistakes, the meannesses and the neglectful acts of daily life? Do you have a history of “sin language” that causes you to dislike the use of the word or the concept? Does “sin” refer to an act, or to a state of being, such as separation from God?
- b. How is confession a part of good spiritual health?
- c. Consider forms of confession—psychological therapy, the inventory of recovery groups, the Roman Catholic sacrament of reconciliation, weekly congregational confession, or evening prayers. Is the purpose of these spiritual practices depression and self-disgust or joy?
- d. Sometimes family dynamics or peer pressure lead to a person receiving a bad hand—it may seem like having to pick up the whole discard pile. When has this happened to you, or to a family member or friend?

Close with a form of playful prayer called “The Game of Joy.” Deal everyone five index cards and ask them to write “joy” on one side. Invite each participant privately (this will not be shared) to write one thing that happened in the course of the preceding day on each card, knowing that one of these five is something to be “discarded.”

Each one says, while placing the card to be discarded face down in a pile on the table: *God, help me to play my hand in life trusting that you are always willing to let me discard the old and draw a new card of joy. Thank you. Amen.*

5 Grab Bag

Leader preparation: Because this activity works with pairs, use only as many scriptures as allow that kind of participation—four scripture passages if there are eight participants, ten if there are twenty participants, and so on. Prepare more than expected. Preread these common verses and choose ones appropriate for the particular group. They are intended to be scriptures that suggest joy without containing the word. Some groups may be ready to ask the most personal question in the activity, “How do you need joy right now?” but others may not be ready for this level of sharing.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- scripture citations written on index cards and cut in two pieces with complicated or puzzle-like cuts
- sticky name tags with the single word “joy” on them sufficient for the number in the group

Give each person a card with half of a scripture citation. That person must find the person with the corresponding half. Here are ten suggested scriptures for a group of twenty people. Genesis 21:1–7, the birth of Isaac; Exodus 2:1–10, the birth of Moses; Jonah 2:4–17, Jonah is swallowed by a fish; Matthew 4:1–11, Jesus in the wilderness; Mark 7:24–30, the Syrophenician woman; Luke 8:26–39, the Gerasene demoniac; Luke 23:32–43, the crucifixion of Jesus; John 20:24–28, Jesus and Thomas; Acts 16:11–15, the conversion of Lydia.

The partners work together to discern what constitutes “joy” in each passage. Is the joy simple or surprising, complicated or familiar? What does each passage suggest to the two readers about our experience of joy? If it seems appropriate, share as well: How do you need joy right now? After five minutes each group shares what they discovered about joy from the passage and their conversation.

Invite a volunteer to read aloud Psalm 30. Invite the group to locate the two instances of joy. What do these two verses say about joy? Is joy merely “happiness written large” or does it have a distinct quality? What part does contrast have in understanding joy? What can be learned about our experience of joy from this psalm?

Close by going around the circle, with each person taking a “joy” nametag and placing it on the next person’s chest, saying, “You will have mourning, but God turns it into dancing. You will take off your sackcloth because God clothes you with joy.”

6 Dancing with the Stars

Leader preparation: There will be no scoring with this activity. Everyone dances—everyone wins!



Supplies:

- Bibles
- posters: “Dancing ‘Til Dawn” by Marianne Millar <http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters12> and “Joyful Dance” by Diana Ong <http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters11> (easily viewed or projected; have hand-held versions available for anyone with limited vision)
- music before session: either “The Gambler” by Kenny Rogers (“You’ve got to know when to hold them, know when to fold them”), <http://www.tinyurl.com/2e62tn2> or “Luck, Be a Lady Tonight,” from *Guys and Dolls* <http://www.tinyurl.com/23zth54> (judge the age and tastes of the group) (optional)

Begin with an intentional time (at least five minutes) just to look at the two pictures, which should be identified by title so that the group knows that they are both about dancing. In the discussion that follows there is one rule (harder to follow than might be expected). People may talk about one picture or the other or both of the pictures together, but there should be no preference expressed. Optional: You might play some quiet music during this time.

Suggested questions to get the conversation going:

- What are similarities between these two pictures? (For example, the backs of the dancers in both are to the viewer—what might this mean?)
- How does each express the concept of dancing?
- What is the impact of the palette (the choice of colors) in each of the pictures?
- How does each of them make you feel? What are the dancers seeing that the viewer does not?

Ask a volunteer to read Psalm 30 and ask how each picture or both pictures together illuminate the text. An interesting note for the group might be that a picture “illuminates” a text when it “sheds some light” on a person’s understanding of it. This is different from a picture “illustrating” a text—in that case the picture is consciously made to express the artist’s experience of that text.

Close by reflecting on the reason the psalmist uses the counterpoint of “mourning” and “dancing.” Why does it not say, “You have turned my mourning into . . . celebrating”? or “working hard”? or “having a good sleep”? or “playing a nice game of darts”? How is dancing the opposite of, or the response to, mourning?

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Everyone Make a Circle (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read about a conversation circle on Attachment: Activity 7, “A Circle of Conversation.” This comes from the book *God in My Life: Faith Stories and How and Why We Share Them*, ed. Tirabassi and Tirabassi (Pilgrim, 2008), <http://www.tinyurl.com/29r5ff5>, which is directed at youth ministry. It can also work wonderfully with adults. This exercise, a formal pattern of answering questions in pairs rather than a more general conversation, avoids the problem of some participants remaining quiet while others speak often. It also allows participants to recall their first response to a question rather than losing the thread in a longer discussion.

Be aware and consider verbalizing the fact that some people will not have many early happy memories of play or that some forms of abuse are cloaked in the language of “play.” Invite all the participants to consider all play settings—home, friends’ homes, school—to find a happy moment in their personal contexts.

Arrange for each pair to have a copy of the following questions or arrange to project them so all can see.

Supplies:

- “A Circle of Conversation,” Attachment: Activity 7
- bell to move the process along

The group gathers in a circle and counts off for the circle of conversation. The leader participates if there is an odd number present and simply watches the group dynamics if there is an even number.

Questions for the Pairs:

- a. Share an early joyful memory of play. It can be at home or at school, at a grandparent’s house or on a vacation. It can be solitary play or play with others. It can be imaginary play, creative play, sports play, a board game. There are many possible memories. Don’t worry about finding the best possible one, but share the first one that floats up in memory.
- b. Name a comfort toy or a comfort place or a comfort book or a comforting physical activity (perhaps thumb-sucking or running) from some time in your life. How did it function and for how long?
- c. Name a tough memory about play: you were not invited to a party or chosen for a team, your toy was broken, you were sick and missed it, and so on. Share any story from any age that comes to mind.
- d. When was the last time you “played”? What was that activity? Is there enough play in your life?
- e. As Christians we “tell the stories” of others, many of them faith stories. With this last partner, please share briefly one of the stories you have heard around the circle—a joyful memory of play, a self-comfort, a painful memory, or a recent time of playing. Consider seriously whether you think someone would like you to repeat his or her story and choose one you are confident is “fair to share.” Of course, this is also a test of whether you were really listening to the other person or trying to figure out what you were going to say.

Close by sharing insights gained from this process and a shared commitment to create more opportunities for play.

8 Say it! Sing It! Pray It! Play It!

Leader preparation: Inviting people to move even a little bit can feel threatening, and discussing liturgical dance is sometimes a “hot button” issue. Beware.

Supplies:

Supplies:

- song: “Say It! Sing It!” Attachment: Activity 8
- pencils and pens



Open with simple actions to the words that follow:

- finger to lips—“God, teach us to sing,”
- prayer-hands—“teach us to pray,”
- hands on heart—“teach us to love,”
- hands spread wide—“and give love away.”

As members of our community of faith we sit, we stand, we kneel, we clap, we greet with hands or hugs, we pass plates of money and bread. We look down at our hymnals or up at our screens, we bow our heads, shut our eyes, and fold our hands in prayer, we hold babies and little cups and little candles, we raise our hands in benediction. What we do with our bodies in community is important, even in a negative way—like the choir member’s slouch or the preacher’s shaking judgmental finger. Psalm 30:11 speaks of turning mourning into dancing. People of faith have expressed themselves in the movement of dance for a long time.

The group will first learn the song “Say It! Sing It!” until they can sing it with confidence. Then divide into groups of four and instruct each group to plan movements to express the song. Give the groups five minutes and then have them demonstrate the movements they have created.

How has dancing this song made it come more alive?

Close in prayer:

*God, you are the music, but we sing the songs.
You are the listening, but we pray the prayers.
You are the wonder, and we stretch our imaginations.
You are the compassion, and we offer someone a hug.
You are the Spirit that gives meaning to your children’s searching,
and we have learned to dance and play and show your love. Amen.*



9 Duck, Duck, Light

Leader preparation: The game “Duck, Duck, Goose . . .” involves a circle of children, sitting and facing inward. One child walks around tapping or pointing to each player in turn, calling each a “duck” until finally picking one to be a “goose.” The goose then rises, chases, and tries to tag the chooser, while the chooser tries to return to and sit in the goose’s chair. The following activity, “Duck, Duck, Light” is based on the game, but the person chosen as “Light” must name a source of light or hope in the world and automatically becomes “it.” No running! We all have a turn “walking in the light.”

Supplies:

- Bible
- circle of chairs around a low table
- poster: “Shotgun, Third Ward #1” by John Biggers
<http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCRresources>

Invite a volunteer to read 1 John 1:1–2:2. Citing the verse about walking in the light, encourage the group to play a little “Duck, Duck, Light,” naming sources of light in the world. After each person has named a source of light or hope, open the John Biggers picture on the low table so that all can look at it closely, suggesting that perhaps the children in the picture are playing “Duck, Duck, Splash,” a water form of this game.

Discuss the picture, asking the group to name what else besides the child’s game they see in the picture. The children’s play is set in the context of the destroyed church, which may be burning or may have been destroyed in the past.

Draw the group’s attention to 1 John 1:8–10 (Inclusive Bible): “If we say we are without sin, we lie, and the truth is not in us. But if we admit our sins, God, the faithful and just One, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all injustice. If we say we have not sinned, we call God a liar and show that God’s Word is not in us.” This is always a balance to walking in the light. Invite the group to name some of the contemporary shadows or sins.

The response to them is 1 John 1:6–7. “If we say we have intimacy with God while still living in darkness, we are liars and do not live in truth. But if we live in the light, as God is in the light, we are one with each other, and the blood of Jesus, the Only Begotten, purifies us from all sin.”

Reflect

This Exploration has been “Playing and Living Joyfully: Discovery,” but it has also been “discover this group of practitioners.” Spend some prayerful time thinking about them. As a group they may be more comfortable or responsive to certain learning styles—the use of songs or the art posters, traditional Bible study discussion, or more personal interactive activities. This may guide future choices—both toward that comfort level and sometimes away from it for a challenge.

Consider the individuals. Are there particular needs, concerns, or sensitivities? Did someone surprise himself or herself with an insight? Is someone quiet who may want help to contribute verbally? Is someone quiet who should be left alone? Is someone masking insecurities by monopolizing conversation? Does someone “push your buttons”? Pray for every person in this group. Consider those in the community of faith who would gain from this practice; invite them to join your group.

Close by asking each person to name again the source of light from the game at the beginning, or another one even more appropriate.

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Attachment: Activity 2

A Prayer for Play

Let me not be too old to fly a kite,
looking into the sky, trusting the wind.

Let me not be too grand,
or grounded in responsibility,
to swing high from an oak tree branch,
or build a castle in the sand
that waves will wash away.

How little like a job is that?

How even less like housekeeping
is the flash of jacks,
the sharing of the red rubber ball
with a good, good friend,
or the intricate skip-litany hip hop
of urban-alley jump rope.

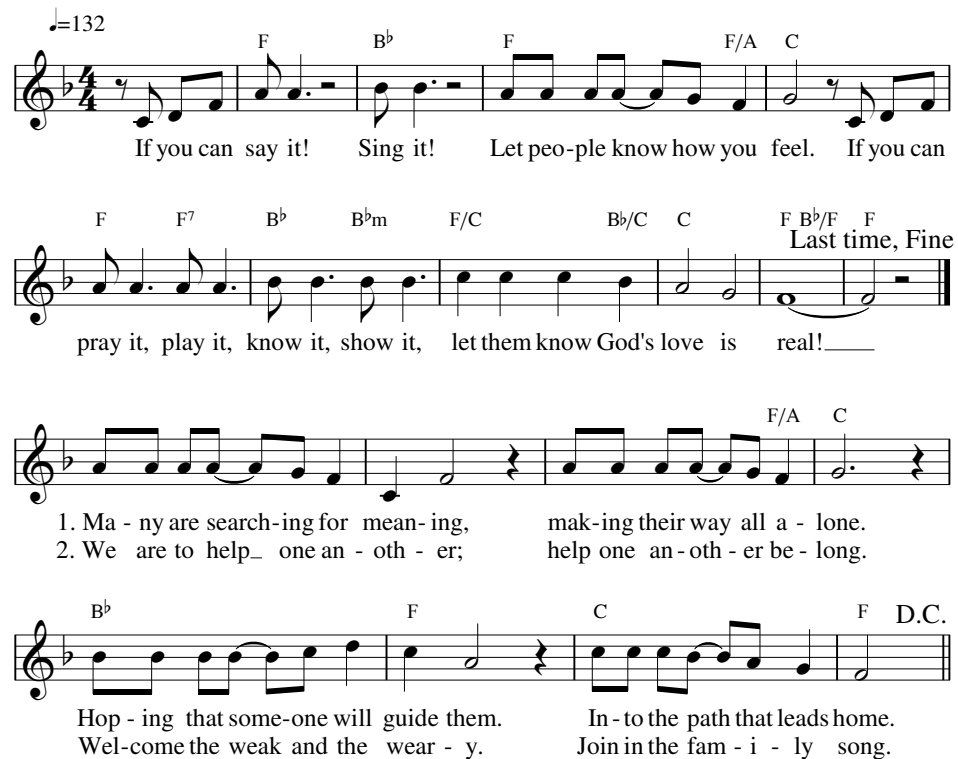
How sweet and briefly chance
the faith communities of sidewalk chalk,
fire hydrant's splash,
the firefly chasing of a country night.

Maren Tirabassi

Attachment: Activity 3 and 8

Say It! Sing It!

$\text{♩} = 132$



If you can say it! Sing it! Let peo-ple know how you feel. If you can

pray it, play it, know it, show it, let them know God's love is real! ___

1. Ma - ny are search-ing for mean-ing, mak-ing their way all a - lone.
 2. We are to help_ one an - oth - er; help one an - oth - er be - long.

Hop - ing that some-one will guide them. In - to the path that leads home.
 Wel - come the weak and the wear - y. Join in the fam - i - ly song.

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Attachment: Activity 7

A Circle of Conversation

from *God in My Life: Faith Stories and How and Why We Share Them*
ed. Maren C. Tirabassi and Maria I. Tirabassi
(Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008)
<http://www.tinyurl.com/29r5ff5>

The group sits in a circle and counts off by twos. A #1 and a #2 speak with each other, responding to a single question. Then a bell is rung and each #1 moves counterclockwise to sit with the next #2 and so on so that everyone has a new partner. The #2s do not move. If a pair is in deep conversation, a #1 can move past that pair to the next available #2 and they will not move till the next round (*sharing the next question as well*). No pair should stay together for more than two rounds.

Give about four minutes—two minutes for each person to answer. Ask four questions, and then, with the fifth partner, share a story that someone else has shared. Remind participants at that time to think about confidentiality and consider which of the stories that they have heard are appropriate to share. This repeating can be hard to do and helps people seriously consider how we talk about one another in other contexts. At the conclusion, spend some gentle time collecting insights from the experience. The whole process takes about forty minutes. (*The shortened version, two minutes per question, takes twenty minutes.*)

Why is this not an icebreaker? This is a serious time of sharing stories, and the regularity of the pattern helps those who hate the chaos of finding someone in a large room and/or being the last chosen. In an icebreaker form of game, people are often more concerned about plotting the next switch than listening to the current partner. In the circle of conversation, each participant also has an opportunity to learn something very interesting about several people—not only the ones with whom he or she would normally sit. There is great comfort in anticipating the next partner and deciding on the level of vulnerability.

Playing and Living Joyfully



Exploration: Scripture

About this Age Group

Adults often approach scripture as a game with rules (and they are ready to get the Scrabble dictionary out and check on one another) rather than a free-for-all or a pick-up game. Approaching texts playfully as a spiritual practice calls for adult participants to set aside the preconceptions formed by a long history of study groups and sermons. They will discover that playful is also pray-full, just as becoming joyful is a serious experience of life.

About this Exploration

The history of our faith, recorded in scripture, is a tale of human beings who, like us, wrestled with doubt, oppression, and sorrow. Yet this story is rooted in a creation that God proclaimed good, and undergirded with the joy that comes from the assurance of God's faithfulness, forgiveness, and healing. This story, which is our story of salvation, invites us to creative imagination and to finding our own part in the "play."

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Mark 9:30–37
Philippians 2:1–13

Leader Preparation

Playfulness and the scriptures? Those seem like two very different things. Is the Bible frightening, boring, confusing? Or is it fun? When Jesus was asked about a staffing hierarchy in God's realm, he invited a child into the midst of the disciples. We wonder what the child might have taught the disciples. Yet when we think of it, we remember that the most serious enterprise for children is play—it is how they develop creativity, practice life skills, and learn to interact with others. If a children's agenda is central, then playful, joyful living needs to be on all our "to-do" lists.

Prayer: Star-writer God, all of us long to read your words. Wind-singer God, all of us love to listen to your harmony. Seed-planter God, we rejoice in your harvest. Lava-chef God, we are warmed by your power. God of eagle and blue heron and chipmunk, we swoop and stalk and scamper following your path. Help me to invite all the participants in my small group to the playground of the Holy Bible. 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 Serv-

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 We All Fall Down (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: The church in Philippi, which met in the home of Lydia the purple dealer from Thyatira, was Paul's favorite church. Their support of him and his warmth toward them (in spite of Paul's gentle criticism of church conflict) have left us amazing passages of scripture. This includes a song that appears to be embedded in the text (Philippians 2:5–11) that describes Christ Jesus' self-emptying into humanity, then death, even capital punishment, and then the reversing of this in the resurrection. This song is preceded in our passage by encouragement for community solidarity and is followed by a commission to each individual. Allowing the group to see this threefold division without tearing the text apart will facilitate the discussion.

Supplies:

- Bible
- "We All Fall Down," Attachment: Activity 1
- circle of chairs (close enough so that hands can be held at the end)

Ring-a-ring-a-roses,
A pocket full of posies.
Ashes! ashes!
We all fall down.

"Ring around the Rosie" is a nursery rhyme first printed in 1881, but sung to the current tune as early as 1790. A popular meaning "discovered" in the 1950s was that it was a coded description of the Great Plague—it's red ring-shaped rash, warding herbs, a sneeze, and death. However, later scholars determined that it was simply a playground game involving holding hands in a round dance and then collapsing into a giggling pile.

Read Philippians 2:1–13. Divide into three equal groups (this will also work with pairs) and use the questions on "We All Fall Down," Attachment: Activity 1, for discussion on one of the divisions of the longer passage. Each group of participants is asked to rewrite its section of the passage into words meaningful to them. Encourage them to make this translation relevant even to very particular situations. Each group is also asked to add a line from their discussion to the concluding prayer. Invite each small group to share with others the "mind" of their discussion. Close by holding hands and having one volunteer will read the closing prayer.



2 Grace Notes

Leader preparation: Read the passage from *Circle of Grace* (Attachment: Activity 2) and reflect on a couple personal stories of children making a difference in the lives of people around them to be available to jump-start the conversation if it slows down.

Supplies:

- Bible
- "Circle of Grace," Attachment: Activity 2
- roll of foil
- table covered with attractive fabric (use short and taller stacks of hymn books to create different heights, or steps, under the cloth)

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

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

Have a volunteer read aloud Mark 9:33–37. In Penelope Stokes’ book *Circle of Grace* (Doubleday, 2004), <http://www.tinyurl.com/24oqkq8>, there are a number of characters, all friends of the central character, Grace Benedict, age 52, who is dealing with a difficult diagnosis. Tess is one of these friends who recollects her feelings at a younger age. She published her first novel at the same time that she and her husband adopted a four-year-old child, Claire. Finishing that novel consumed most of Tess’s time, so Claire bonded with her dad while her mother was writing. The novel *Rachel’s Wilderness* received devastatingly negative reviews. Invite the group to read along silently as one reader begins aloud at: “Tess had missed so much . . .”

Discuss how this child “put into the center” of a life made a difference. Go around the circle and see how many people can come up with a story about a child—a relative, a neighborhood child, a church school child—who did something, said something, played something that made a difference.

Hand everyone a small piece of foil and invite them to mold a child that they would put in the center of their lives to remind them of God’s realm values. This may be a real child (for example a grandchild) or the concept of a child who is molded by adults but yet so tough and flexible. Put these small sculptures on the central table sitting on the various steps made in the cloth. Go around this circle of grace saying, “I thank God for the child in the center, [say child’s name]” or “I thank God for all the children in the center.”



③ We See It in Shades of Play

Leader preparation: Consider the participants—have any been deployed to Afghanistan in the last ten years? Do any have relatives who have been there? Invite them to share background information they may have when the photograph is discussed.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- poster: “Children Play in the Old Town of Kabul, Afghanistan,” <http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters10>
- worship center with a single candle and a soccer ball on a lovely cloth or cloth of the liturgical season
- drawing paper and pencils or crayons (optional)

Invite the group to take a moment of quiet meditation and come up with a picture of a child or children playing. It could be something they’ve seen this week or a memory from their own childhood or their children’s or grandchildren’s childhoods. It could involve organized sports or free-range playing, group play or solitary play, board games or dress-up. This is free association—the first thing to come to mind should be shared around the circle. In a longer session, they can draw, even with stick figures, this mental picture.

Invite a volunteer to read aloud Mark 9:30–37. This passage contains one of Jesus’ predictions of his own death—a teaching that the disciples found hard to understand. Then the disciples turned to the perennial “who is greatest” discussion, which may be one of the definitive traits of human beings. But when Jesus was asked about a staffing hierarchy in God’s realm, he invited a child into the midst of the disciples. The most serious enterprise for children is play—it is how they develop creativity, practice life skills, and learn to interact with others. Ask the group how each of their mental pictures of children playing could be put into the center of a discussion on God’s realm.

Show the photograph “Children Playing in the Old Town of Kabul, Afghanistan, November 26, 2001.” This is not a black and white photograph, but a color photograph, and this is simply the color of this city that, by 2001 when the photograph was shot, had already experienced a decade of war. Have the participants contrast the photograph with the mental pictures they have described (or drawn). Ask in what ways these boys are models of receiving God’s realm.

Invite the group into another quiet meditation with this statement: Today these are the children Jesus Christ has put in our midst. He says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me” (Mark 9:37). After a few minutes invite the group to share their thoughts.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Mirror, Mirror on the Wall—Show Us More When We Recall (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Sometimes it is easier for people to consider the concerns of children—their sons or daughters, nieces, nephews, grandchildren, neighbors, or church friends—than reflect on themselves as a child, either the past child, or the current child, hidden but still very present.

Supplies:

- Bible
- “God with Skin On,” Attachment: Activity 4
- hand mirror large enough for full-face view

Sitting in a circle, go around the group and invite each person to look in the mirror and say, “I am a child of God.” Then ask a volunteer to read aloud Mark 9:33–37.

In the mode of discernment it’s important to begin not just with what is learned about priority and welcome from today’s children, but to place ourselves as children in the midst of our discussion. In *God with Skin On: Finding God’s Love in Human Relationships*, Anne Robertson investigates how people experience the divine because of the various ways they have experienced God through other people. Read her paragraphs on early peer relationships and the way they shape adult experiences of trust, competition, and fun.

Suggested questions for the discussion:

- a. How do Robertson’s descriptions of playground experiences resonate in your memory?
- b. Do you recall being confronted with the selfish Naomi and a sense of the scarcity of resources, or the generous Naomi and an atmosphere of cooperation? Perhaps you remember an example of each of these scenarios.
- c. How did these earlier experiences affect you on later occasions? Is the impact still felt by you now?
- d. Now that this child (who is yourself) is put in front of you, is there a way to “welcome” this child by healing old grievances or building on positive nurture?

Close by going around the circle again. As each person passes the mirror to the next person, he or she says, “You are a child of God.” The response is, “Thank you.”

5 Musical (and Artistic) Chairs

Leader preparation: Prepare assistance for any physical or sensory limitations in the group. If someone has limited mobility, create a space for a wheelchair near each picture. If there are visual problems, print a color copy of each poster for the person who may need to hold it or expect to stand beside the person to give a verbal description. People will respond very differently to different pictures. Some people may find it an emotional “bump” to sit in chairs facing away from the group. In the final discussion, avoid letting people argue about the “merits” of different pictures.

Supplies:

- posters: “Allerheiligen” (All Saints) by Wassily Kandinsky, <http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>; “Shotgun, Third Ward #1” by John Biggers, <http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>; “Children Play in the Old Town of Kabul, Afghanistan,” <http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters10>; “Joyful Dance: by Diana Ong, <http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters11>; and “Dancing ‘Til Dawn” by Marianne Millar, <http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters12>
- a circle of chairs facing these pictures, clustered so that when the participants sit, each will be looking at a picture rather than the walls between pictures.
- CD player and song “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You” (Ode to Joy) recorded in a loop (see <http://www.tinyurl.com/7h8xu2>)

As the participants listen to “Ode to Joy” in either an instrumental or vocal rendition invite them to walk slowly around the room inside the circle of chairs. Each time the music stops, they sit in the nearest chair and look at the painting in front of them, seeking to understand what it says to them about joy. This practice continues until most people have sat before most paintings, if not all (but let them walk past several or even do a complete circle at some points to replicate the game of musical chairs).

Paul wrote to the church in Philippi that he hoped they could “make his joy complete.” Invite this group to make your joy more complete by sharing their experience. The participants will turn chairs around and find a seat perhaps close to the picture that moved each one the most. Invite them to speak about this activity. They can explain a favorite picture, describe a sensation of joy—or lack of joy—in several pictures, or simply share something about the experience of being offered a “text” in visual images rather than the more common printed words.

6 Child in the Center—You’re It!

Leader preparation: It is one thing to talk in general terms about putting a child in the center, welcoming children, or understanding how we are children, and quite another to actually engage with the literature, films, and games of childhood for personal discernment. This takes the most significant leader preparation of any activity because you need to find a film clip, television episode, or book that can be the center of this gathering. The leader who is not currently parenting young children can find a wonderful resource in the local children’s librarian.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- children’s book or film clip such as Maya Angelou’s *Amazing Peace*, <http://www.tinyurl.com/25jdhmw>
 Patricia Polacco’s *Chicken Sunday*, <http://www.tinyurl.com/2e8pkbu>
 Margaret Wise Brown’s *Runaway Bunny*, <http://www.tinyurl.com/297ar8f>
 Douglas Wood’s *Old Turtle*, <http://www.tinyurl.com/27o9qzo>
 or Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*,
<http://www.tinyurl.com/2duhvp0>
 (also 2009 film version, <http://www.tinyurl.com/ycc7as5>)

Invite a volunteer to read aloud Mark 9:33–37. If children are truly in the center, then perhaps looking for insights for adult life from children’s literature, film, or television will provide new challenges. As an introduction, go around the circle and have each person share his or her favorite children’s book or movie. If there is a large number of people, have each turn to a neighbor and share this memory with one person.

Read or watch the children’s literature. Discussion may flow immediately, but some suggested questions might help:

- a. What are the themes in this book/film? Do they remind you or connect with themes of biblical stories?
- b. Would you read this to a child? Why or why not?
- c. What do you learn from this story that gives you insight on your current life issues?
- d. Do you think it is important for adults, especially those who do not currently live with children, to be aware of trends in children’s literature, film, and games? Why or why not?
- e. (optional) What do you think of controversies about children’s literature in recent years, such as J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series <http://www.tinyurl.com/2akf3gc> or Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series, <http://www.tinyurl.com/2efzfew?>

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Brainrainbows! (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Taking the time to think of all the possibilities without a deadline (look at that word—dead-line) is an incredible luxury. Sharing lots of thoughts so that a few emerge is usually called “brainstorming” (look at that word—brain-storm—yuck!) This is a chance for people to “brainrainbow” playful possibilities for the church. The purpose is coming up with lots of ideas and having joy doing it. Worrying about “time” tamps down the “I’m.” Jumping to “funds” really dumps the “d” on fun.

Supplies:

- big pieces of newsprint—lots of them for every group
- crayons for writing (take away their pens and pencils)

Divide the group into three sections (or more if there would be more than five participants per group). One group will brainrainbow a game or craft that can be brought to a local assisted living facility (fingerprint tablecloth, making trail mix for a local scout group, musical walkers . . .). Another group will brainrainbow a

playful worship element for the next liturgical season (a blessing of the crèches for the first Sunday in Advent, an Epiphany arts festival, the use of Celtic music—the serious and less serious—around St. Patrick’s Day . . .). The third will brainrainbow a playful event with or for children in the church or community (a postholiday party for children of incarcerated parents, a Mardi Gras pancake dinner with Bible games, an old fashioned cradle roll party for the families of the nursery . . .).

The full group gathers again to share their ideas. A small group may have one idea or several. Is one of these feasible, and is there energy to pursue it or seek others to do so? Good but not necessary. There are no winners or losers—all of these ideas will be saved. The purpose is to generate them without immediate pressure—that is the playful way. If one is going to pursue one, be sure to put it on a life-line (rather than a dead-line!).

8 Cranium

Leader preparation: “Cranium—A Game for your Whole Brain”

<http://www.tinyurl.com/2d7k52t>

is a party board game that was created by Whit Alexander and Richard Tait because Tait decided that most games didn’t appeal to the variety of mental skills that people have. Each game appealed to one kind of skill. Sufficient for you to know for this activity is that “Cranium” uses artistic, trivia, language, and performance skills in a number of ways.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- pack of index card playing cards—four different cards repeated several times so that the group can play two rounds
- Card 1: “Artistic—have an artistic mind and suggest something that uses some form of arts (music, graphic arts, theatre) to bring Jesus Christ to the community.”
- Card 2: “Trivia—have a trivial mind and suggest something very small (a kindness, a courtesy, an inclusion) that would make congregational worship or fellowship a place to meet Jesus Christ.”
- Card 3: “Language—have a language mind and suggest a new form of invitation or education to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to those who are not insiders with our traditions and jargon.”
- Card 4 “Performance—have a performance mind and suggest a justice or mission engagement that would remind people that Jesus Christ mindfully pursued a cross.”

Invite a volunteer to read Philippians 2:1–13. Reread verse 5: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus . . .” How can we have the same “mind” as Jesus? In past years people used the acronym WWJD—What Would Jesus Do?—to guide their actions. Fair enough. How can Paul invite us into WWJT—What Would Jesus Think? The mind that is recommended by Paul is the one that doesn’t count on equality with God. It’s the anti-superhero Jesus who empties out all privilege in order to take on the most incredible sending and serving ever imagined.

Introduce the concept of the game “Cranium” and play two rounds with people responding with free association to the card they draw. The game was developed to respond to the variety of people’s mental skills. Random drawing and not using teams will probably result in participants having to use their anti-skills, their least developed and most humble gifts. At the end, choose one of the possibilities and take it further in the church or community.



9 It's Playtime!

Leader preparation: Having a party in a sacred space may make some people anxious. Remember, Jesus was the all around party-goer: lunch with Matthew the tax collector; dinner with Zacchaeus; that wine in Cana; and several dinners where people anointed his head or washed his feet. People were often calling him a drunkard or glutton. The “tricky” part of this activity is that it takes place in the chancel!

Supplies:

- Bible
- party hats
- food to share
- decorations
- “Charades for a Church Party,” Attachment: Activity 9, cut into strips
- folding tables, or plan to serve from the communion table

After meeting in the accustomed space, bring the group to the chancel or chapel and tell them that this is going to be a miniparty. Read Philippians 2:9–10. “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.” Tell the group that the one rule is that every time the name of Jesus is mentioned they all must bend one knee. Say grace: *Jesus bless this happy time. Touch us lightly; help us rhyme. So much hoping, so much search—Jesus, meet us here in church. Amen.*

Reflect

Consider the ways the participants in the group experience child-in-the-center. Some of these adults may have frequent interaction with children or grandchildren. Some may connect with children in the church or neighborhood or through a job. Others may experience children through news media, children’s books, films, or television shows. Still others may reflect on their own childhoods or the child who is still within them—full of play or tears. Spend some time praying for the group and all the children they are in a position to welcome directly and through justice advocacy. Pray for yourself and the child you can welcome and become.

Eat and play charades. The person who guesses is the next “performer” or can pick that person, if he or she has already had a turn. This can be replaced by another short game. Make sure the name of Jesus is mentioned in any game.

Finally, discuss whether it feels odd or unusual to party by the pulpit, play charades under the cross, laugh uproariously in a place so often solemn. Must sacred always be somber? Does holy only happen with the mouth turned down? Is there a way to make worship a time of even greater joy?

Attachment: Activity 1

We All Fall Down

Philippians 2:1–13

(from The Inclusive Bible—feel free to use your preferred translation)

Advice to the community

¹If our life in Christ means anything to you—if love, or the Spirit that we have in common, or any tenderness or sympathy can persuade you at all—²then be united in your convictions and united in your love, with a common purpose and a common mind. That is the one thing that would make me completely happy. ³There must be no competition among you, no conceit, but everybody is to be humble: value others over yourselves, ⁴each of you thinking of the interests of others before your own.

Discussion Questions

- How can you put this in your own words?
- What does it mean for your “group” (this could be church, family, or work-place)?
- What does it have to do with either “falling down” or “holding hands”?

A Hymn or Song about Christ

⁵Your attitude must be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

⁶Christ, though in the image of God,
didn't deem equality with God
something to be clung to—

⁷but instead became completely empty
and took on the image of oppressed humankind:
born into the human condition,
found in the likeness of a human being.

⁸Jesus was thus humbled—
obediently accepting death, even death on a cross!

⁹Because of this, God highly exalted Christ
and gave to Jesus the name above every other name,

¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee must bend
in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth,

¹¹and every tongue proclaim to the glory of God:
Jesus Christ reigns supreme!

Attachment: Activity 1 (continued)

Discussion Questions

- How can you put this in your own words?
- How is Jesus' emptying out or falling down a model for you ("have this mind among yourselves")?
- Look at the ending prayer, and have your group add a line.

A Personal Commission

¹² Therefore, my dear friends, you who are always obedient to my urging, work out your salvation with fear and trembling, not only when I happen to be with you, but all the more now that I'm absent. ¹³ It is God at work in you that creates the desire to do God's will.

Discussion Questions

- How can you put this in your own words?
- How do you reconcile the charge to work out your own salvation and to let God work in you—is there a kind of "holding hands" to this?
- Right now, what is "salvation" in your life?
- Look at the ending prayer, and have your group add a line.

Prayer

*God, we all fall down—
we don't remember to encourage friends;
we fail to keep promises;
we don't make time to express sympathy in more than a greeting card;
we hold on to our own opinions as if letting them go was a defeat;
we put ourselves at solar-central in our lives,
(Add a line:)*

we _____

_____ .

*Lead us into the game of love, where
on our knees, it won't hurt so much to fall down,
and, holding hands with one another and with you,
our fear and trembling is not some kind of illness,
but the beginning of a complete joy! Amen.*

Attachment: Activity 2

Circle of Grace

by Penelope Stokes (Doubleday, 2004), p. 228

Tess had missed so much those first few months. Absorbed in the important work of finishing the Great American Novel, she had both physically and emotionally absented herself from her new daughter's life. But when *Rachel's Wilderness* launched and immediately sank before it ever got out into deep water, Tess found her perspectives radically altered—by force, initially, if not by choice.

Aimless and disoriented, she wandered through the days immediately following *Rachel's* demise like a war refugee suffering from traumatic amnesia. What was she, if not a writer? Who was she? And where in God's name was she supposed to go from here?

Stalwart little Claire, with the immeasurable wisdom of a child, held all the answers. Tess was Mommy, and she was supposed to go to the park and play.

And so Tess played. She mastered the seesaw and the jungle gym and the vertigo-inducing curved slide on the far edge of the playground. Tucked her daughter in for afternoon naps. Created wild, floury messes in the kitchen, trying to figure out her grandmother's recipe for homemade brownies. Read *Horton Hears a Who* and *Wind in the Willows* and *The Secret Garden*.

Children, fortunately, tend to be resilient, and this particular child was extraordinarily forgiving. As soon as Tess made the first tentative move toward her, Claire flung herself into her mommy's arms and reached out to haul her daddy into the family hug. The little girl's compelling love drew them all together and held them there, and Tess felt a trickle down her spine, a shiver of understanding. Her icebound pain had begun, at last, to melt.

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Attachment: Activity 4

A Circle of Conversation

from *God in My Life: Faith Stories and How and Why We Share Them*
ed. Maren C. Tirabassi and Maria I. Tirabassi
(Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008)
<http://www.tinyurl.com/29r5ff5>

The group sits in a circle and counts off by twos. A #1 and a #2 speak with each other, responding to a single question. Then a bell is rung and each #1 moves counterclockwise to sit with the next #2 and so on so that everyone has a new partner. The #2s do not move. If a pair is in deep conversation, a #1 can move past that pair to the next available #2 and they will not move till the next round (*sharing the next question as well*). No pair should stay together for more than two rounds.

Give about four minutes—two minutes for each person to answer. Ask four questions, and then, with the fifth partner, share a story that someone else has shared. Remind participants at that time to think about confidentiality and consider which of the stories that they have heard are appropriate to share. This repeating can be hard to do and helps people seriously consider how we talk about one another in other contexts. At the conclusion, spend some gentle time collecting insights from the experience. The whole process takes about forty minutes. (*The shortened version, two minutes per question, takes twenty minutes.*)

Why is this not an icebreaker? This is a serious time of sharing stories, and the regularity of the pattern helps those who hate the chaos of finding someone in a large room and/or being the last chosen. In an icebreaker form of game, people are often more concerned about plotting the next switch than listening to the current partner. In the circle of conversation, each participant also has an opportunity to learn something very interesting about several people—not only the ones with whom he or she would normally sit. There is great comfort in anticipating the next partner and deciding on the level of vulnerability.

Attachment: Activity 9

Charades for a Church Party

There are three categories: hymn names, stories from the Bible, and things found in church. Create symbols so that people have the correct category.

Jesus Christ Is Risen Today

Pulpit Bible

Daniel in the Lions' Den

Jesus Stills the Storm

It Came upon the Midnight Clear

Oh Jesus, I Have Promised

Jesus, Name above All Names

Advent Wreath

Joseph and the Many-Colored Coat

Jesus Blesses the Children

Attachment: Activity 9 (continued)

All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name

Pew Cushions

Elijah and the Chariots of Fire (you got the hardest one!)

Just a Closer Walk with Thee

Jesus Raises Lazarus

How Can I Keep from Singing?

Jesus Calls Us o'er the Tumult

David and Goliath

Alleluia! Sing to Jesus

Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine

Stained Glass Window

Playing and Living Joyfully



Exploration: Discipleship

About this Age Group

It's not solitaire. Adulthood is filled with loneliness. Empty nest, divorce, death, and loss of senses, mobility, and memory result in people feeling they are playing a solitary hand, one that has been dealt by an unkind reality. Discipleship means that we are always learning and growing and that we do that together. It takes practice, and it takes "a practice" to teach us that we are never too old to play, never too sad to play.

About this Exploration

In the Exploration of discipleship we focus on play as an experience of taking turns, learning every position on the field—from goalie to coach, from forward to cheering fan. In discipleship there are no benchwarmers. In Christian community, all experience the amazing joy of Special Olympics, as each participant is embraced at the finish line by Jesus Christ.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Galatians 4:4-7
Revelation 7:9-17

Leader Preparation

You are the leader, facilitator, mentor, coach or referee, and guide for the practice “Playing and Living Joyfully.” Kidding, right? This is a special responsibility because we are all always discipling on our faith journeys—each of us is sometimes the leader and sometimes the learner.

This may be a time in your life when you are not “situationally joyful,” and you may need to discover the importance of practicing joy and how play contributes to that practice. On the other hand, if you are situationally joyful, then it is even more important for your guidance of others with their many different experiences to understand joy in the midst of sorrow and joy as a choice.

Prayer: God, when I am sad, let me practice joy. When I am happy, let me practice joy. When I am suffocating under work, let me practice play. When I am bored and feel meaningless, let me practice play. Keep me disciplined—discipled—in my practice, so that I may share it 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 Serv-

Exploring & Engaging Activities

1 Can't Tell the Players without the Score Card (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Whenever worship is discussed, there is a possibility that complaints about worship may arise. Remember to refocus on the agenda of worship that is done by “a great multitude, that no one could count, from every nation . . .” (Revelation 7:9) and the ways it is the result of our joy and a contributor to our joy.

Supplies:

- Bible
- Sunday bulletins or “Parts of Worship,” Attachment: Activity 1
- whiteboard or newsprint and markers

Welcome the group and explain that they will be exploring discipleship for the faith practice “Playing and Living Joyfully.” Share introductions, if necessary, and any prayer concerns if that is a regular part of gathering.

Invite a volunteer to read Revelation 7:7-17. The most common, frequent, and necessary aspect of our community of faith is worship. Worship is a time and place of Christian growth and change, where disciples bring their life journeys and they receive new direction. Invite the group to identify verses descriptive of worship in Revelation 7:10-12. These verses are full of joy, although the gathered group from every nation, people, and language are defined by their experiences of suffering.

Invite the participants to explore a contemporary worship service element by element. The group can use Sunday bulletins or a written description (if the order of worship is usually on PowerPoint® or paperless). They could also use the worship pattern on Attachment: Activity 1, “Parts of Worship.” Divide the group into pairs or triads with each pair taking a different small grouping of elements of worship.

They answer two questions for their section: 1. How does this express joy? and 2. What kind of play is similar to this moment in worship?

An additional part of the assignment may be more difficult. Invite wild and loose play comparisons, metaphors, parables. Offer suggestions, such as: the procession is like a parade, baptism is like swimming, a Christmas pageant is like dress-up, the offering is like a relay race, the sermon is like a game of “Clue,” and so on. As they lighten up and have fun talking about worship, insights will emerge from the sheer joy of it. After five minutes invite them to share their responses to the questions or metaphors and any insights about worship.

Further issues for discussion include contrasting the impact of joyful noise in worship on those who have had happy weeks and those who have experienced difficult weeks; the particular aspects of worship that have been most meaningful to participants at different times in their lives; and the variations in playfulness and the outward expression of joy in different seasons of the church year.

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

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



2 It Boggles the Mind

Leader preparation: Spend time reflecting on teachers in your life—the formal school kind and the less formal friend, neighbor, relative, scout leader, coach kind. Try to focus on one and consider how that person influences your leadership for this group.

Supplies:

- “Prayers for Teachers,” Attachment: Activity 2
- rough draft paper
- pencils or pens

Begin by having volunteers read the two reflections by teachers from the *Daybook for New Voices: A Calendar of Reflections and Prayers by and for Youth*, edited by Maren C. Tirabassi and Maria I. Tirabassi (Pilgrim Press, Cleveland 2004),

<http://www.tinyurl.com/25a6emj>.

See Attachment: Activity 2.

Discipleship involves learning, growing, changing, and being taught. Invite the group to write in a single column every word they can think of that has to do with learning, school, education, even absorbing a recipe at a grandmother’s knee. Keep this to one minute or there will be too many words! Invite each participant to turn to a neighbor so that they are in pairs and invite each to read their lists to one another. Eliminate any word that is on both lists.

After the words have been shared and each person has a shorter list of his or her personal words, use these words to write either “A Prayer for Teachers” or “A Prayer for Students.” Some may wish to write a prayer for a particular teacher or one for a particular student. Some may wish to share these aloud. Others may end up giving their prayer to a particular teacher or student.



3 All I Ever Needed to Know

Leader preparation: In *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, <http://www.tinyurl.com/2fk5euo>, Robert Fulghum wrote, “Think what a better world it would be if we all—the whole world—had cookies and milk about three o’clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankies for a nap.” You need not have read the book in order to invite people into this exploration—all it takes is a basic understanding of “parable.” If there are seekers in this group, pause and take the time to explain a parable.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- “What’s the Parable for Your Education?” Attachment: Activity 3
- paper
- pencils or pens

As we explore the discipleship aspect of playing and living joyfully, not only is Paul’s image of each one of us as adopted children of Abba God and heirs of the realm of God a powerful one, but the core memory of Jesus’ use of parables—mustard seeds, wineskins, lost children—to express spiritual truth is important.

Open with a writing game, “All I ever needed to know . . .” based on Robert Fulghum’s book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. Turn to the resource sheet and read the two humorous adaptations of his statement. Invite the group to choose a learning environment of their own and try to write a parable. Give them four to five minutes and share the resulting triumphs of parable-making.

Invite a volunteer to read Galatians 4:4–7. Paul sets this passage in contrast to other forms of education. In the preceding chapter he cites the law of Moses as an instructor who is “pink slipped” by God’s adoptive intervention. Discuss the differences between any other form of education and “learning from a loving parent.” (There will be more on adoption itself as chosen parenting in another activity.)

Close by shaping a several-part statement as a group: “All I ever needed to know I learned from God’s Spirit in my heart: . . .”

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Super Bowl (Football) Quiz (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This is an opportunity to let a sport that is rarely connected to church become a parable. Reflect on your own feelings about football or other competitive sports.

Supplies:

- “Super Bowl Quiz—Discipleship,” Attachment: Activity 4
- newsprint or whiteboard and markers
- a football or other sports paraphernalia (optional)

Put the Super Bowl quiz questions on newsprint or a whiteboard, or fold over the attachment so only the quiz is available at the beginning of the session. Open by suggesting the importance to Jesus’ ministry of using parables. If he were talking today in a local church, Jesus might well use football rather than fishnets, mustard seeds, runaway children, or the famous carjacking on the Jericho road.

Use these quiz questions about an important contemporary form of play to discuss faith. Focus most particularly on the discipleship distinction—understanding God as quarterback, coach, or referee. One way to allow individuals to share freely, if you have a football (even a toy one), is to “pass” the football to the person who wishes to speak and let them “run with it” for a few yards (sentences) before it is passed again.

Expand this activity by including a secondary discussion of competition in sports or, if this takes place close to the time of the Super Bowl, a discussion of claims that domestic violence increases during the playing of the Super Bowl (there is little conclusive evidence that this is true).

Divide the group into pairs or triads to create parable questions from another team sport. Share these—don’t discuss them, but reflect on how easily team sports can facilitate the discussion of discipleship, a team activity from the beginning.

Close with a benediction from Argentinean theologian Gerardo Oberman “Benediction from a Mother’s Tenderness,” which lifts up in blessing another image of God. You can find it on Attachment: Activity 4.



5 Join the Team

Leader preparation: It is easy to overlook the gifts of one's own community. They, like the hard work of the older sibling in the story of the prodigal son, are always there. Here is a reminder that one community is found on the community pages on the Faith Practices website. They are open to anyone—subscriber or not. Materials for this Exploration are taken from these pages and reorganized in a useful fashion. There is more there—take a look. Think about what it might be for you to contribute to the community pages as an individual or as a group for one of the faith practices of the future.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- “Wisdom from Community Pages,” Attachment: Activity 5
- computer with Internet access (optional)
- newsprint or a whiteboard and markers for some “brainrainbows”

Invite a volunteer to read Galatians 4:4–7. The thrust of this passage seems so personal, so individualistic—oneself and God. Invite the group to identify what is community oriented about our adoption through Jesus Christ as children and heirs of Abba God.

This resource was set up with “community pages” so that anyone could be a part of the team for “Playing and Living Joyfully.” Use Attachment: Activity 5 to get acquainted with some of what is there.

Think about this: Read around, each person reading each quotation and pausing for reflection, using the quotes that were shared. Identify the ones that have meaning and why they do. Add your own illustrations. No exact quotes are necessary, but go around the circle with each person contributing: “I read a novel with a playful/joyful passage . . .”; “I just read a book to my daughter . . .”; “I heard a song on the radio . . .” (Lee Ann Womack’s “I Hope You Dance” might be a pump-primer here, <http://www.tinyurl.com/25dmbxp>). Make note of these “remem-quotes” (loose citations that are not remembered precisely) on newsprint or a whiteboard. Notice how much wider the suggested references are after just a few moments in communication!

Recognize this: Read the little definition of “benestrophe” from the community pages. A benestrophe is the opposite of catastrophe: a well-turning in a fruitful idea. Go around the circle again, adding briefly a benestrophe from each person’s experience. How many benestrophes we can name when we listen to one another!

Do this: Read the list of play suggestions for God’s children. Go around the circle a third time asking each person for one addition to this list.

Celebrate the richness of your community and consider how every adoption is into a family, a village of some kind, a people, and humanity.



6 Saints Alive!

Leader preparation: All Saints’ Day, November 1, is that occasion each year when we think about people in our lives who are saints—the ones who’ve reached out and made a difference for us. But it’s an appropriate holiday at any time of year and it can be tied into January resolutions, February Valentines, Easter alleluias, Memorial Day memories, Pentecost good spirits, and so on. Some of these people have died and we keep them in our hearts. Some of those people are alive and this holiday can remind us it’s important to say “thank you” to people—to the

grandmother or the doctor, to the friend, the neighbor, the school teacher, the therapist, the person who gave blood or a kidney or a kind word, the scoutmaster, camp counselor, coach, whatever person modeled for each of us the kind of behavior that lifts us beyond ourselves. A healthy dose of gratitude is good for the attitude, and, if we remember those who have been saints for us, it reminds us that somebody is probably looking closely at how we behave.

Supplies:

- Bible
- poster: “Allerheiligen” (All Saints) by Wassily Kandinsky laid flat on a small table that is covered by a cloth, <http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>
- unscented votive candles—as many as participants
- “Saints Alive,” Attachment: Activity 6

Share the concept of All Saints’ Day (adding in any another seasonal emphasis) and the picture “Allerheiligen” (which means “All Saints” or “All the Holy Ones”) by Wassily Kandinsky. Consider the very different ways that saints are represented in the visual imagery. Have a volunteer read Revelation 7:9–12 and consider how the diversity of the saints is a focus in this text as well.

Read the “Saints Alive” prayer, Attachment: Activity 6, as a group, then expand it following the directions. Read the first paragraph and go around the circle with everyone naming a personal “saint.” For each one of these light a candle and place it by the person on the “Allerheiligen” painting. Then read the second paragraph and name the more remote saints—authors, medical researchers—using the examples to stimulate people’s thinking. They may choose one of the examples or might add another one, such as a firefighter who put out a grandparent’s house fire, and so forth. Finally read the first line of the third paragraph: “God, for all the saints I give you thanks.” Go around the circle with each person naming her- or himself, and conclude with the rest of the prayer.

Sending & Serving Activities

 **7 Honorary Coaches and Referees (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: Athletics is often a source of contention in churches, as young people and their parents make decisions about Sunday morning commitments. In towns where games don’t take place during Sunday morning, “away” games often require Sunday morning travel. There is also the ethical dilemma of Friday night sports and Jewish students. This is an important discussion, but it can be a sidetrack on “discipling issues” (and one that few churches can solve).

Supplies:

- “Prayers for Athletics,” Attachment: Activity 7
- circle of chairs for conversation
- a baseball, football, tennis racket on a worship center (optional)

Read the three prayers by young people from Attachment: Activity 7. Suggested questions for conversation:

- a. These three young people brought God into their sports commitment in different ways. Do you think it is important for young people to experience God as part of that aspect of their lives?
- b. How are the three prayers different? What emphases does each bring out?

- c. Usually a discussion about competitive sports begins with the negative side. Having read these positive prayers, what are some of the negatives? (Some possibilities: creating an attitude that life is all about winners and losers, challenging young people's self-worth or falsely inflating their egos, the toxic influence of abusive coaching or overly competitive parents)
- d. How does adult behavior regarding games model to young people a faithful play attitude? (Consider World Series and Super Bowl behavior as well as "soccer mom" behavior).
- e. Are sports a subject of discussion in this church? How can the church influence young people to "play and live joyfully"?

Two ideas that may be of interest to the group have been used by other churches. One is having the church itself be a "competition free" zone—there are no poster contests, pageant auditions, or winner-loser games in the youth group. That also means no competition in fund-raising for Heifer Project! Another idea is to host in the early fall a "Blessing of the Sports Equipment" where young people bring in a basketball, baseball bat (a computer mouse for those who play online games), and so on. The prayers can be for good teamwork, appropriate attitudes to winning and losing, joy in the natural surroundings of games like that expressed in Dana's prayer, blessing in the case of injuries. This faith practice group may want to create the liturgy for this event or "team" with young people to do so. Community youth can be invited, as well as church members.



8 Adoption—Beyond the Metaphor

Leader preparation: The passage in Galatians that uses the powerful image of God's adoption of human beings leads the group to seriously consider the issues of literal adoption and foster parenting. There are many joys and challenges for people who are considering adoption during an unwanted pregnancy, who are waiting for an international or domestic adoption, who are fostering children or considering the change from foster to forever family, or who are searching for birth parents. The easiest way to discuss this is to invite as guests for this activity members of the congregation who are adopted, have placed birth children with adoption services, or have been adoptive families. A single guest or panel of those willing to share their experiences is the most helpful choice, though any honest discussion that raises these issues touches the "sending" aspect of this scripture.

Supplies:

- "Children's Books on Adoption," Attachment: Activity 8
- index cards
- guest resources, Internet study (optional)

Begin with a reading of Galatians 4:4–7. A helpful opening with guests is to invite the guests to share what they think the group should know about adoption from each guest's perspective. A second question would be to ask what fallacies they—the guests—expect that others hold. (This will save embarrassing questions.) A "fishbowl format" where people share questions anonymously on index cards in a glass bowl is sometimes efficient at removing reticence, as is simply asking a guest, "What is your greatest joy, and what is your greatest challenge?"

If no guests from the congregation are available, investigate the issue through the Internet or telephone. The children's books on Attachment: Activity 8 can be obtained from any public library. This is a way of putting a child in the middle again (using Mark 9:33–37). Often those stories written for children have the greatest honesty.

The group may wish to sponsor a larger prepared discussion on the various aspects of adoption for members of the congregation and for neighbors. A moderator of the panel can be someone who is working or has worked in social services.

9 Do as I Do—Adopt Something

Leader preparation: Really sending and serving often takes the group of participants out of their comfort zones—either to an individual decision or to actively engaging the church to participate in something new. A faith practice is practical!

Supplies:

- Bibles
- newsprint or whiteboard and markers
- church by-laws to figure out committees that might be involved (optional)

Invite readers to share some of these passages and then paraphrase each one in their own words:

- a. Matthew 7:12: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”
- b. John 13:14: “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”
- c. Luke 9:47–48: “But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, and said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.’”
- d. John 15:12–17: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

Reflect

The book is never closed on “discipleship” because we are always growing and learning. However, the conclusion of the discipleship Exploration of this faith practice is a wonderful opportunity for retrospection on what you, in spite of being the “leader,” have learned from the other participants.

Take a few moments to consider the insights that have been shared, the particular knowledge someone offered, the empathy shown to you, the assistance with the conversational dynamic, or the rescue at some moment when you were “clueless.” Offer thanks to God for the mutuality of wisdom in this small community of faith.

If there is anything that truly is sending and serving, then it is doing as Jesus Christ has done for us. Read together Galatians 4:4–7. Discuss what it would be like to adopt something and care with the kind of tender care God gives us as we become “heirs.” This could be a child or child care agency—near or far away. This could be a family for Christmas gifts. This could be an animal from a shelter. This could be a piece of land that needs cultivating or a strip of highway that needs its litter picked up.

Invite the group to brainstorm what each of them or the church together could adopt, truly adopt, in an “Abba” way rather than just a financial way, that is, a risky and loving way and not just a duty way. The power of this conversation can remain with people whether or not their plans are able to come to full fruition. Encourage them to do something that is feasible. Don’t just play around. A child waiting for adoption once used the acronym “ADOPT—A Day of Promise and Trust.”

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Attachment: Activity 1

Parts of Worship

Gathering Music

Prelude

Lighting the Candles

Introit

or Praise Choruses

Call to Worship

Processional Hymn

Opening Prayer

Passing the Peace

Time for Younger Disciples
(Children's Message)

Prayer of Our Savior

Sacrament of Baptism

Musical Gift
(Choir Anthem, Dance, Bells)

Scripture Reading

Hymn

Sermon or Dialogue

Morning Prayers

Sharing of Joys and Concerns

Prayer of Confession

Words of Assurance

Prayer of Thanksgiving and
Intercession

Silent Prayer

Response

Offertory

Invitation

Collection

Doxology

Prayer of Dedication

Sacrament of Holy Communion

Closing Hymn

Announcements

Benediction

Congregational Musical Response

Postlude

Attachment: Activity 2

Prayers for Teachers

From *Daybook for New Voices: A Calendar of Reflections and Prayers by and for Youth*,
edited by Maren C. Tirabassi and Maria I. Tirabassi (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004)

<http://www.tinyurl.com/25a6emj>

The Blessings of Teaching in a Small Town

One of my gifts from teaching a fair number of years in the community in which I also live is watching the flow of the seasons. Not only are my seasons measured as fall turns to winter and then to spring, but as freshmen become sophomores, then juniors, and eventually graduate. I receive a new group each autumn and say good-bye to them in the spring. For a brief period of time from August through June, I get to teach them my subject, help them with their fears, share their victories, give them my spin on the world outside, and listen to theirs. Sometimes we click and sometimes we don't. I can never really know the world they live in, but I can try to give them some insights into the ones in which I have lived. Joy has come in meetings later at county fairs and hardware stores when I get to hear their stories of the lives they have created since high school and realize I had a small part in their lives.

—Robert Young, chemistry teacher, New Hampshire

Reflection of Hope

One of my high school students died a few days ago when his friend ran a stop sign and their car was hit broadside. Our high school and community are grieving. I'm in awe of our young people, of their support of one another, and their willingness to forgive; of their acceptance, tenderness, and love. Through their grief they have reassured me that the future is bright. I pray for God to guide and protect them as they travel through each day. May the positive experiences and lessons of these past days stay with them—and with me—every day.

—Barbara Noble, art teacher, Iowa

Your prayer for teachers or students . . . for a teacher or a student:

Attachment: Activity 3

What's the Parable for Your Education?

Ah that well-known tribute—imitation. Years ago, Robert Fulghum wrote, “All I ever needed to know, I learned in Kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sand box at nursery school. . .” With my great thanks to him . . .

All I ever needed to know I learned in my '65 VW bug

Kindergarten came and went, but I was a late bloomer—
everything I really needed to know—driver's ed!

Of course there was: you can park next to anyone
if you know where your own bumper ends.
Fins get a lot of attention,
but a stick shift gets you out of a snow bank.

Life is short on simulators,
so be thankful for the ones you have.
No back seat is big enough to change your life.
(Maybe that's a girl thing.)

Never follow so fast and so close you can't stop.
Watch the people in your rear-view mirror,
remember the ones in your blind spot.

Learn how to fix your own flats.

There is no destination so important you can't
pull over and let an ambulance go to someone's emergency,
or wait for the bright-light procession
of someone's broken heart.

Fix your muffler—people don't want to listen to you all the time . . .
When you are tired—take a nap.
When you get married, tie on some tin cans,
and, when everything is slippery, slow down.

Headlights shine through dark and fog,
and windshield wipers clear your vision.
You can't use them
if you don't know where they are!

And remember—
Only you know when you are running out of gas.

—Maren C. Tirabassi

Attachment: Activity 3 (continued)

And from that educational institution we all love to hate—middle school

Everything I ever needed to know I learned in . . . middle school.
Sometimes I don't fit in my body.
My friend today may not be my friend tomorrow.
I love to be angry with those who love me,
because I can practice all my feelings and they won't stop loving me.
That also works with God.
I think I want to grow up and I think I don't want to grow up.
(Share? Who are you kidding?)
I am lonely and crowded at the same time.
I want to win—a part in the play, a place on the team, a good grade . . .
yes, I want to win, but please don't let me stand out.
A cell phone does . . . and does not make my life better.
Being thin does . . . and does not make my life better.
Driving a car will definitely make my life better . . .
I think.
I want someone with me at a scary movie.
I want someone with me when life gets scary.
That also works with God.

—Maren C. Tirabassi

Now it's your turn:

Some suggestions: All I ever needed to know I learned . . .

- at church camp
- in my grandmother's kitchen
- in the disintegration of my marriage
- in the locker room / green room / under the hood
- in my first job
- by trial-and-error raising my own kids
- in my recovery group (AA, etc.)
- the first time things didn't go my way
- from being a little sister, little brother, PK

Even better ideas may come from you . . .

Attachment: Activity 4

Super Bowl Quiz (Football)

1. In your faith life, what is a touchdown? Can you remember one?
2. What is a fumble? And how is that different from a penalty on the play?
3. What is a huddle? And who is in it with you? In fact, who are the players on your team?
4. Have you ever been tackled by something?
5. What is an extra point?
6. Are you more offense or defense, and what position do you play?
7. Do you think God is more like a quarterback . . . a coach . . . or a referee? Those are all different ways to offer control and support to a team, but they are very different. Why did you pick what you did?

Benediction from a Mother's Tenderness

from the forthcoming book *God in Open Hands: More Worship Resources for the Global Community*
edited by Maren C. Tirabassi and Maria I. Tirabassi (Pilgrim Press)

May the God of Life
be your guide on the road every day,
be your refuge in times of uncertainty,
and be your rest in times of fatigue.

May the God of Life
strengthen you when you feel weak,
comfort you when you feel sad,
and hug you when you feel alone.

May the God of Life
who loves you and knows you,
cover you with the tenderness of a Mother.

Forever. Amen.

Que el Dios de la Vida
sea tu guía en el camino de cada día,
sea tu refugio en momentos de
inseguridad,
y sea tu descanso en tiempos de fatiga.

Que el Dios de la Vida
te fortalezca cuando te sientas débil,
te consuele cuando estés triste,
y te abraze cuando te sientas sola.

Que el Dios de la Vida,
que te quiere y te conoce,
te cubra con su ternura de Madre.

Por siempre. Amén.

—Gerardo Oberman, Argentina

Attachment: Activity 5

Wisdom from Community Pages

Think about this: Some quotations

Dance as though no one is watching you; love as though you have never been hurt before, sing as though no one can hear you, live as though heaven is on earth. ~ *Alfred D. Souza*

Today was good. Today was fun. Tomorrow is another one. ~ *Dr. Seuss*

Maybe we should develop a Crayola bomb as our next secret weapon. A happiness weapon. A beauty bomb. And every time a crisis developed, we would launch one. It would explode high in the air—explode softly—and send thousands, millions, of little parachutes into the air. Floating down to earth—boxes of Crayolas. And we wouldn't go cheap, either—not little boxes of eight. Boxes of sixty-four, with the sharpener built right in. With silver and gold and copper, magenta and peach and lime, amber and umber and all the rest. And people would smile and get a little funny look on their faces and cover the world with imagination. ~ *Robert Fulghum*

I still get wildly enthusiastic about little things. . . . I play with leaves. I skip down the street and run against the wind. ~ *Leo F. Buscaglia*

I don't think it's possible to skip with a frown on your face. . . . I'd like to see the world's governing and terrorist leaders on a skipping tour through the Middle East and across the subcontinent and China to Korea. ~ *Sue Irwin, as posted on iskip.com*

Angels fly because they take themselves so lightly. ~ *G. K. Chesterton*

Recognize this: *benestrophe*

"Bene" means "well" and "strophe" means "turning," so a benestrophe is a turning to the good, to well-being. A benestrophe is the opposite of a catastrophe. Whereas catastrophes are usually large and terrible, benestrophes come in many sizes and lots of them happen every day. Practice noticing, naming, and celebrating them.

Do this:

Make a quilt. Play in a sandbox.

Get a brand new paint box and a sheet of real watercolor paper, and paint a picture.

Play with clay. Jump rope.

Play with a colorful parachute. Go bird watching.

Take photographs of God's creation. Hang a May basket.

Take a walk in the rain. Take a walk with a good friend.

Take a walk with a little puppy and note which things she or he stops to investigate.

Blow bubbles. Try using the holey thing from a communion tray.

Make an easy kite by tying string to the handles of a plastic grocery bag. Then run like the wind in a meadow or a parking lot.

Attachment: Activity 6

All Saints Prayer

God, for all the saints I give you thanks—
for grandparents and godparents,
for doctors and teachers,
for coaches and pastors.

God, for all the saints I give you thanks—
for authors of books that have moved me,
for friends whose one-time advice has
guided me,
for strangers who proved an example,
for my children and the children of others
who have given me courage.

God, for all the saints I give you thanks—
for those nearest and farther away,
for those who have died,
and those who are living,
for those who knew they made a
difference,
and those who never will.

God, for all the saints I give you thanks.
Amen

Expand the Prayer

First paragraph—personal saints . . .

Second paragraph—people we don't
personally know who make our lives
better . . .

(Some examples: medical researchers who work for the cure of diseases, farmers who grow the food we buy at the grocery store, legislators, people who are in television shows and entertain us, people who donate blood or an organ. Try to think of interesting and unusual possibilities, but also the people we sometimes overlook, such as air traffic controllers and snow plow drivers).

Third paragraph—for ourselves as we try
to “say halo” to everyone we meet . . .

Attachment: Activity 7

Prayers for Athletics

Daybook for New Voices: A Calendar of Reflections and Prayers by and for Youth,
edited by Maren C. Tirabassi and Maria I. Tirabassi (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004)

<http://www.tinyurl.com/25a6emj>

The Strength

I sit on the bus as my team laughs and cheers,

Thinking about the game and every aspect.

Listening to my favorite CD, I get in the mood of the game.

The beat of the music soothes my soul, so that I can think about the game
that I will be playing.

I pray that, as the captains, Meagan and I lead our team to victory.

I pray that my team can be a whole.

I pray that Courtney, Jackie, and Sam can have a great setting game.

I pray that Ashley and Nicky have the strength to use their voices.

I pray that Rachel L. and Rachel S. have the strength to spike the ball.

I pray that Brittany and Becky have the strength to Ace!

I pray that Andrea has the strength to serve and bump the ball.

Amen.

—*Chantale Lyons*

Basketball Prayer

Heavenly God,

Give me strength as I play in the game today. Help me to fulfill my goals and give 110%. Give me the courage not to get down on myself or become frustrated. Help me to play to the best of my ability. Hold my teammates in your hands and help them to understand the things I am praying to you now. Most importantly, remind me that playing hard and learning from my mistakes is more important than winning.

—*Liana Merrill*

Attachment: Activity 7 (continued)

Coach Me, Lord

Cool, freshly cut grass fills me with its sweet earthy scent
as I step from the shadows into the light.

Thank you, Lord, for the black drape, laden with diamonds over my head,
for this gentle wind tickling my face, sending strands of hair across my brow,
for the agility of my body, free from burden,
and soaring over hurdles and closer to your
heavenly gates.

It's just what I dreamed it would be,
energy like electricity sparking and shooting through the air,
pricking the hairs on my back.

Disks of beauty and wonder, burning bright,
illuminate the sky with their glory,
the dirt, rich between my fingers.

I scent it on my face, coating me in milk chocolate brown,
making me feel strong.

Your presence lingering in the air, touching my shoulders softly,
engulfing my glove.

I thank you, Lord, for the presence of my family at this moment,
their love overflowing
onto the field, infusing the flowers with happiness,

My gratitude I forever owe them and you, my Lord,
you are so wondrous,
so mighty, so magnificent . . .

Please stay with me through this hour of battle,
keep my eyes keen,
my judgment sharp,
my mind free of hate and angst.

If we lose, give me the strength not to scream in rage and sadness.

If we win, give me the strength not to boast and gloat.

Keep me from harm's way,
let me catch the ball,
hold me in your arms,
lest I fall.

Be with me as my heart beats out of my chest,
my breathing rolls like waves against the rocks.

—Dana Canelli

Attachment: Activity 8

A Selection of Children's Books on Adoption

"A" is for Adopted, Eileen Tucker Cosby, <http://www.tinyurl.com/2baegru>

Tell Me Again: About the Night I Was Born, Jamie Lee Curtis,
<http://www.tinyurl.com/273rreu>

My New Family: A First Look at Adoption, Pat Thomas, <http://www.tinyurl.com/23bb5vf>

The Day We Met You, Phoebe Koehler, <http://www.tinyurl.com/27pm5hw>

I Love You Like Crazy Cakes, Rose Lewis, <http://www.tinyurl.com/27d2cgg>

Zachary's New Home: A Story for Foster and Adopted Children, Geraldine M. Blomquist, Paul B. Blomquist, Margo Lemieux (illustrator),
<http://tinyurl.com/39g4zgs>

Rain Forest Girl: More Than an Adoption Story, Chalise Miner
<http://www.tinyurl.com/2ff3bvy>

Adoption Is for Always, Linda Walvoord Girard, <http://www.tinyurl.com/2ae3593>

Welcome Home Little Baby, Lisa Harper, <http://www.tinyurl.com/2b8233h>

I Wished for You—An Adoption Story, Marianne Richmond,
<http://www.tinyurl.com/25e95fs>

What Is Adoption? Helping Non-adopted Children Understand Adoption,
Sofie Stergianis and Rita McDowall, <http://www.tinyurl.com/22w528r>

Twice-Upon-A-Time: Born and Adopted, Eleanora Patterson
<http://www.tinyurl.com/23xqpmx>

Did My First Mother Love Me? A Story for an Adopted Child, Kathryn Ann Miller
<http://www.tinyurl.com/2bno34b>

You're Not My Real Mother!, Molly Friedrich, <http://www.tinyurl.com/25ntfqa>

Mommy Far, Mommy Near: An Adoption Story, Carol Antoinette Peacock
<http://www.tinyurl.com/2adq49e>

Playing and Living Joyfully



Exploration: Christian Tradition

About this Age Group

Many well-churched adults play Christian tradition as a game of acquisition, like Monopoly or bridge. Their points add up by having more church staff, better programs, the most up-to-date technology, even more inspiring or theologically pure worship. On the other hand, adults who wander back to the community of faith after a period of time away or who are completely new to church may worry that the tradition is some kind of holy charades with secret answers they will never guess.

About this Exploration

Christian tradition comes from many places and cultures throughout the world. We learn to play and live joyfully from the traditions of communities who have lived through persecution: Christians in the catacombs, the early reformers, Africans who were enslaved, people in same gender loving relationships, immigrant-based faith groups, and others. We learn in new ways—to party, to dance, to eat, to sing, to talk, and to celebrate with our whole being.

Yet tradition is many things, and it does not have winners and losers. A better “playful” metaphor is the Ferris wheel with its wide, high sweet sweep of lighted vision and willingness to stop each time someone needs to climb on. Each pause shows everyone on the circle a new perspective.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Isaiah 11:1–10
Song of Songs
(Solomon) 2:8–13

Leader Preparation

“Tradition” comes from a Latin root meaning something handed down. It includes a customary way of doing things, like a family Christmas Eve ritual, a set of beliefs or guidelines for behavior, and the stories behind both the customs and doctrines. Tradition keeps the gifts of the past alive. Tradition can also suppress the creativity of the present.

Spend time in personal reflection. Begin with something traditional that has limited, hurt, or frustrated you. Acknowledge that reality for yourself and the participants in this practice. Next consider a precious tradition you have received from your family, friends, or faith community. As you treasure it, remember that the participants will have their own tender traditions. Unfortunately, the very same thing may be oppressive to one person and sacred to another. You may find yourself naming this dichotomy.

Prayer: *God of our great-great-godmothers and -godfathers, God of our great-great-godsons and -goddaughters, help us in our practice to prune tradition, cutting away the strangling vines and nurturing the bulbs of hope, the shoot from the stump of Jesse. Amen.*

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 Sleds, Kites, Beach Balls, and Bonfires (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Some background on the Song of Solomon is helpful. Commentaries, biblical encyclopedias, and even Wikipedia give good and simple descriptions of the book of poetry itself and the history of its inclusion into the tradition.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- “A Gathering Prayer on a First Spring Morning,” Attachment: Activity 1
- paper
- pencils or pens

One of the shorter books of the Bible, Song of Solomon contains the dialogue between a man and a woman who are in love, while a chorus of the “daughters of Jerusalem” adds their voices. It is passionate and it is sexy and, even though this was obviously not its original intent, it has been included in the Jewish canon as an allegory of the love between God and Israel. Christians have sometimes seen it as an allegory of the love between Christ and the church or Christ and the human soul (although it is one of the books never directly quoted in the New Testament). In this Exploration of Christian tradition for faith practices, we engage both the personal intimacy and the handed-down wisdom that these words somehow express the mutual passion of human and divine.

Read Song of Solomon 2:8–13. This passage clearly portrays love in the context of the season—and it is equally appropriate for wedding scripture and devotional reading. Matthew Stevens of the United Church of Canada wrote four prayers, one for the beginning day of each season. Share his “Gathering Prayer on a First Spring Morning” and his description of how he intends to combine the Christian and First Nations traditions.

Invite the group to take a few minutes to write based on their favorite season—winter, spring, summer, or autumn. This can be a human love poem or a prayer to God based in the seasonal imagery. Invite any who wish to share their writing.



2 Animal Crackers

Leader preparation: Perhaps the most humorous Hebrew Bible parable is the story of Jeremiah burying his underwear in Jeremiah 13 (check it out). However, a case can also be made that Isaiah and Ezekiel as well as Jeremiah stretched their imagery in hopes of reaching people’s hearts and minds. There is more to Isaiah 11 than a Christmas card! The point may be to allow the playfulness and allow the edginess at the same time; they are both motivated by the hope of human conversion to a way of living justly and joyfully.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- animal crackers and milk (both dairy and soy should be available)
- “This is the way I play with the Bible,” Attachment: Activity 2

Gather the group for animal crackers and milk. Use the poem “This is the way I play with the Bible” as an opening reading. The author maintains that there is

Session Development

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

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

something playful about the stories we have in the Bible, often called the Holy Bible in order to make it off limits for fun. What a surprise that would have been to many of the characters mentioned inside its covers! The passage for this exploration comes from Isaiah, and it is a description of an amazing Messiah and an amazing place. It has sometimes been waylaid by Christmas cards of the “Peaceable Kingdom.”

Read Isaiah 11:1–10 and discuss it. Suggested questions for discussion (choose one or two that work for the group):

- Justice advocates and ecology/green advocates are often in conflict. How does this passage interconnect the two concepts?
- Why does true justice for the poor need more than immediate sensory input (what the eyes see and the ears hear)? An example to get this going may be the way people critique “welfare cheating” or undocumented immigrants.
- The creation peacefulness of predator co-existing with prey specifically lifts up children—why is this the case?
- How are we “predators”?
- Is this playful, lighthearted, and beautiful imagery a way to touch hearts that a stark condemnation of human greed, injustice, and selfishness might make defensive?



3 Holy Scrabble

Leader preparation: This works best with small groups—eight or less. (There could be two boards with two groups playing simultaneously.) There are no directions to suggest that people use the double/triple letter/word spaces—or higher scoring letters. In fact, there are no scores at all—just cooperation in using the tiles available to create a holy language. Notice whether the group tries to play it “to win” because they are so accustomed to competitive elements. Christian traditions have been competitive in the past, and that has been a source of much conflict. Gently redirect the group.

Supplies:

- a Scrabble board (Super Scrabble with more letters works well) or another game that has individual letter pieces, such as Banagrams
- “Say It! Sing It!” Attachment: Activity 3

Open by singing or reading together the text of the song “Say It, Sing It” on the attachment. People are searching for meaning and that is the basis of Christian tradition—the long handing-down of the ways that people make meaning. Each person does that in a separate way, but those ways are interconnected.

Place the Scrabble board on a center low table with all the letters facing up. (You can also play this without a board—just use the table.) Suggest that the participants “play” Scrabble by creating what they consider to be “holy words.” These can be words such as: Jesus, prayer, wonder, mystery, communion, joy, daylight, or perhaps the name of a child or a parent who has died. Provide a number of examples to get the group started. Each person plays a word and must say why that word is holy for him or her. The words must be interconnecting on the board (the players don’t need to explain why they attached a word to a particular other word). Everyone’s holy word must borrow at least one letter from another person’s holy word—that is how tradition works.

Continue until all the tiles are played. Have a brief reading of the words, perhaps going around the circle and having each person read aloud at least one word that she or he did not contribute. Conclude with “Say It! Sing It!”

Discerning & Deciding Activities



④ Song of Solomon Scavenger Hunt (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: If there are mobility issues in the group, be sure that the sought-after objects are on one level. The game is to loosen people up; talking about sensuality between humans and as a metaphor between human and God makes some people profoundly uncomfortable.

Supplies:

- “Song of Solomon Scavenger Hunt,” Attachment: Activity 4
- listed objects in the appropriate places

Divide the group in two (or three) smaller groups and distribute the Scavenger Hunt. It should take about five minutes and should familiarize the group with this scripture. Here are clues for you as the leader:

1. Bible
2. purple
4. apple, raisin
5. paper heart on the communion table, maybe under the chalice
6. cross or manger
7. spoon stirs, alarm clock wakens

Suggested questions for discussion:

- In Song of Solomon, as in life, love can sometimes seem like a “hunt” or a search. Have you ever had that kind of experience?
- Have you ever experienced some person you love (partner, child, friend, parent) as being more attractive, more perfect than anyone else and amazingly describable with extravagant metaphors?
- Have you ever worried about someone who chased after a beloved person to their own emotional detriment?
- Why do you think that sensual love has been used as an appropriate metaphor for love for God throughout scriptural history and then in mystical literature?

⑤ Play It Again, Sam

Leader preparation: Ask church musicians to record “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee” (<http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong10>) three times, perhaps one on piano meditatively, one on flute or guitar brightly, one on organ with a stately or marching beat. The contrast is important, not the quality!

Supplies:

- Bibles
- hymn books that include “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee” (tune: Ode to Joy) <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong10>
- DVD player or computer and prerecorded music
- paper for each participant

- pencils or pens
- newsprint or whiteboard and marker

Invite the group to go around the circle once saying, “This morning (evening) I feel . . .”

Opening prayer: *God, gather up all the themes of our emotional music into your harmony. Play the score of our community, make a melody out of even our missed notes, and resolve the chords of all our longings. Our lives are a song we offer to you. Amen.*

Play the three different styles of recorded music. After each is played ask for one-word responses. Contrast the responses. This music is Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy.” Discuss whether the “joy” is in the music itself, rather than our memory of Henry Van Dyke’s lyrics, and whether joy itself can be different when it is played at a different tempo. Wonder aloud if there are different “moods” of joy. Challenge the group to come up with the first verse lyrics from memory; then distribute the hymn books so that they can check themselves.

Suggested questions for discussion about the lyrics:

- “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee” compares human emotional and spiritual life with natural objects. Hearts are like flowers. Sin is like a cloud. Chanting birds teach us to praise. Identify some other metaphors or parables.
- How does this natural imagery connect to the passages from Isaiah 11 and Song of Songs 2, both of which present creation both as itself wonderful and as a mirror for human life?
- How would this song change if “joyful” were replaced by one of these words—“hopeful,” “wistful,” “fearful,” “happy”? Is this a song about any and all relationships between God and God’s children, or is it specifically one about joy. Support your argument with a line from the hymn’s lyric or the music itself.

After taking the hymn apart, draw it together again by listening to the most meditative prerecorded version or by the group humming it softly.



6 View from the Ferris Wheel

Leader preparation: Christian tradition often seems like it should be providing answers rather than asking questions. But, in fact, the wisdom that has been passed down is less about restrictions than about having enough patience to wait for new patterns and even enough patience to recognize that, though there are some things beyond our immediate understanding, our faith points us in the right direction.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- poster: “Sisters in the Wind” by Ethan Hubbard
<http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>
- poster: “Dancing ‘Til Dawn” by Marianne Millar
<http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters12>
- index cards (two for each participant, distinct colors)

Share the “play contrast” from the “About This Exploration” and “About This Age Group” sections: Many well-churched adults play Christian tradition as a game of acquisition. “We have more or older traditions than you do.” Or “The way we do things is right and the way you do things is not!” Or even “Our way of breaking with tradition is better than your way and besides . . . it’s how we’ve always done it!”

A better “play” metaphor for Christian tradition is the Ferris wheel with its wide, high sweet sweep of lighted vision and willingness to stop each time someone needs to climb on. Each pause shows everyone on the circle a new perspective. The construction of a Ferris wheel is complex and costly and the safety guidelines are comprehensive, but the view is worth it. Christian tradition comes from many sources all around the world and it, too, is complex, costly in effort, and constantly seeking to be more comprehensive. We are particularly energized to see, to play, and to live joyfully by the traditions of communities who have lived through persecution: Christians in the catacombs, the early reformers, Africans who were enslaved, people in same gender loving relationships, immigrant-based faith groups, and others.

Spend time with the two posters that show people looking off stage or into the distance, at the daybreak and into the wind. They are not exactly “Ferris wheel views” but they seem to perceive almost as much distance. Invite each participant to take one card and write what he or she imagines the girls are seeing and feeling in Ethan Hubbard’s photograph. Next, take the other card and write what the women might be seeing and feeling in Marianne Millar’s painting.

Go around the circle and invite each person to share one of the cards. After the first pass, ask if any would like to share their other card. Discuss the experience of empathy with the figures in these works of art and the personal “seeings” that emerged.

Ask a volunteer to read one of the most famous of all God’s “Ferris wheel” passages, Isaiah 11:1–10. What an amazing view! Discuss how this passage intersects with the pictures. If each person were given an index card to describe what the prophet deep in our faith tradition was seeing or feeling, what would it be?

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Bark, Bray, Buzz, and Slither (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: This is a conversation, so it is listed as “easy preparation.” If the group decides to move further toward hosting an animal justice event or a Blessing of the Animals service it will entail more work! The history of St. Francis and the resources of a local Humane Society or Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals are good places for additional material.

Supplies:

- Bible
- “Bark, Bray, Buzz, and Slither,” Attachment: Activity 7

Open with a reading of “After the World Series.” The writer of this poem learned from watching animals play that the nature of play does not need to be as competitive as human games often become. Invite the circle of participants to each share something they have “learned” from an animal. This may be a companion animal with which they now live or one from the past. Encourage as well insights from creatures of the wild—from hawks in the sky to cheetahs racing across the plains to the mongoose in deadly confrontation with a cobra (and vice versa).

Invite a volunteer to read Isaiah 11:1–10. This text that describes a realm of peace and a time of hope does so by lifting up the images of animals and children. Connect this text to the insights shared from the conversation about animals. As discerning turns to serving and study turns to action, how might it involve

animals? A free-form conversation may lift up care for meat animals, fur-bearing animals, “puppy mill” issues, guidelines for animal testing, or abuse of animals. These insights may lead to a worship service of blessing local animals, or to personal commitments to ethical care or dietary change.

Close with the anonymous prayer often attributed to Albert Schweitzer (see Attachment: Activity 7).

8 Playing with the World

Leader preparation: This activity involves seated movement. Holding a beach ball in one’s hands, touching the round beauty of the earth, even symbolically, opens up the heart. You can find the lyrics to “Over My Head” at

<http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong12>.

Go to <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong12a> to hear a choir sing the song.

Supplies:

- words and music to “Over My Head” (African-American traditional song) <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong12>, <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong12a>
- inflated globe (easily found in a toy store; an Earth ball can be created by cutting out continent shapes from a map and gluing them on a beach ball of contrasting color)
- adhesive bandages

This faith practice is about playing and living joyfully—truly elements of the Christian tradition. Invite the participants to play with the world by tossing it around. Each person who catches it names a place in the world that is a source of joy. The joy may have come from ethnic heritage, a vacation visit, enjoyment of traditional music or food from a particular place. Repetition is acceptable.

Then distribute adhesive bandages and suggest that this time, as the participants catch the ball, they name a global concern—this may be a particular country or it may be a more general concern, such as refugees, war, world hunger, global warming, the extinction of species. Each one places a band aid on a representative place for this concern. Encourage anyone who wishes to remain verbally silent and simply position a bandage to do so.

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



9 Playing . . . over an Adder’s Den

Leader preparation: There is relatively little information about artists’ biographies in public education. The question about knowledge of African American artists is not a hostile question, but people may feel defensive about the issue. This may be a helpful subject to pursue. Creating an evening of background on African American artists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries may be an interesting project for a member or the group to offer to the larger church community. As the group is given index cards to write a prayer after the initial reflection on the art, assure them that there will be an opportunity, but not an obligation, to share the prayer.

Supplies:

- poster: “Shotgun, Third Ward #1” by John Biggers <http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>
- “Playing over an Adder’s Den,” Attachment: Activity 9

- index cards
- pencils or pens

Invite each participant to look at John Biggers' "Shotgun, Third Ward #1" for five minutes in silence or with soft music playing, and then to write a prayer on his or her index card. Share as many of these prayers as the writers are willing or put them in a pile and ask participants to read someone else's prayer. Offer material on Dr. John Biggers from Attachment: Activity 9 or the Internet, and use the questions to discuss both general knowledge of African American artists and this particular representation of joy and danger.

Reflect

Christian tradition often has an Ebenezer Scrooge reputation, while much of what is actually handed down is joyful, like these scriptures from Isaiah and Song of Songs and rituals in the community that embody good news.

In what ways did the participants claim the joy in the common tradition, share some of their precious personal traditions, and identify traditions that need to be let go or changed? Perhaps there wasn't always agreement; that's one reason for handling this aspect of our community life with playfulness!

Read Isaiah 11:5: "The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den." Discuss the relationship of this image of play and danger, joy and threat, in light of "Shotgun, Third Ward."

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

Attachment: Activity 1

A Gathering Prayer on a First Spring Morning

Matthew Stevens

from *Gifts in Open Hands: More Resources for the Global Community*
(Pilgrim Press, forthcoming, 2011)

G'zhem-mnidoo, Creator of all things great and small:

This morning I saw him—just where you called him to be! He wasn't very big, actually kind of scrawny looking. But when the frost leaves Omizakamigokwe's breast he will grow plump again. Here in the time of Ziisbaakdoke-Giizis he will welcome growing stronger.

His bright red chest caught my eye. When I looked there was Opichiinh standing quite alert on a patch of open grass between the last remaining snow drifts. His cheerful colour is such a contrast to all the muddier hues, that even though he was quiet, he made my heart sing. After this long winter season he is a welcome guest.

He is a tough one, this brave little warrior. He has survived winter, and so he must have taken well the teachings that only Gaa-biboonikaan can provide. I don't see his wiiwan, but then her feathers are so much more subdued, that my tired old eyes may have missed her. I hope she also survived the winter, for she too will be a welcome guest.

G'zhem-mnidoo, it is good to be alive on this day. Soon the ziinzibaakwadaaboo will begin to flow in the sugar maples, and we will taste again the sweetness of life. The Zhaganaash calendar may call this time "spring," but my returning robin friend and I know that soon fresh ziinzibaakwad will be a welcome flavour on our tongues.

And so it seems, Creator of all things, that we too have survived another winter. Do you ever wonder if your sentient creatures have learned much from the harsh lessons that Gaa-biboonikaan teaches? Did you called our winged brothers and sisters to our land to remind us of transforming new life, and teach us to sing again? That is a welcoming thought.

We come into our church circle around you, G'zhem-mnidoo, beginning to thaw from our self-imposed frostiness by the little signs you have shared with us. In our worship this morning may our words and songs be as genuine and honest as the robin's melody. May we lift our heads high to the heavens, fill our lungs with life-giving air, and raising our voices in a harmonious chorus of thanks and praise. Surely that will also be a welcomed sound.

Chii-miigwech, G'zhem-mnidoo.

As a person of Aboriginal heritage I was privileged to serve for many years as a minister within First Nations communities. Being also regarded as an elder I was anxious to promote a blending of our traditional Native spiritual heritage, with the Christian practices the United Church of Canada follows among the dominant society. In this regard I find total harmony between the quintessential spirituality of both traditions, and reintroduced many of our symbols and approaches to the church service. As many within my congregations had suffered through Residential Schools, where missionary types literally beat into them a residual fear of any Native ways, the reintroduction had to be done very gradually and carefully. At that time there were very little or no resources available that I could turn to, and so although I am by no means a liturgist, I wrote some of my own. —Matthew Stevens

Attachment: Activity 2

This is the way I play with the Bible

This is the way I play with the Bible—
I watch God’s holy pictionary of Eden,
slip and slide with Noah,
clap at the great jenga of Babel,
hide and seek till my Sarah-laughs
give me away,
lay down with a stone pillow
for a game of Jake and Ladders,
win the Exodus “get out of jail free” card,
and then play wilderness tag
for a long, long time.

This is the way I play with the Bible—
I draw a checkerboard
on the leatherette cover
and name the checkers—Hannah, Eli,
Samuel, Saul, David, Jonathan,
Abigail, Bathsheba, Absalom—
and watch them jump one another
on the way to be kinged.

This is the way I play with the Bible—
Go Fish with Jonah,
jump rope with the acrostic psalms,
pin the tail on Jeremiah.
Then I sit down with Isaiah and the kids
next to the serpent den,
watching the big top
in the sweet peaceable circus of hope.

I do not play charades with Ezekiel,
want-to-be-a-millionaire with Solomon,
chariot-racing with Elijah,
any kind of poker with Qoheleth
who knows a time to hold’em
and a time to fold’em,
and a time for every purpose under
heaven.

Any politician who mistakes Esther
for a Barbie doll,
is in for a big surprise.

This is the way I play with the Bible—
I discover that no one can sit
on the bleachers
or be left on the bench
with Jesus,
when he writes in the sandbox,
somebody doesn’t die,

“get up little girl”
is what everyone is longing to hear,
dice can break your heart,

and, when we all circle up
for that great “duck, duck, goose”
we call the church—
the “it” in the center is always a child.

—Maren C. Tirabassi

Attachment: Activity 3

Say It! Sing It!

$\text{♩} = 132$



If you can say it! Sing it! Let peo-ple know how you feel. If you can

pray it, play it, know it, show it, let them know God's love is real! Last time, Fine

1. Ma - ny are search-ing for mean-ing, mak-ing their way all a - lone.
 2. We are to help_ one an - oth - er; help one an - oth - er be - long.

Hop - ing that some-one will guide them. In - to the path that leads home.
 Wel-come the weak and the wear - y. Join in the fam - i - ly song.

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Attachment: Activity 4

Song of Solomon 2:2–13 Scavenger Hunt

1 Find the clue-keeper for this scavenger hunt.

2 Find something that is the liturgical color when the vernal equinox—spring—begins.

3 Have someone not on your team sign here.

I am deeply in love. _____

4 Find something eaten in this passage.

5 Find a heart on our banquet table.

6 Find a symbol that God's "intention toward us is love."

7 Find two things that do the action in verse seven. (*Hint: One is in the kitchen and one is in the office or bedroom.*)

Attachment: Activity 7

Bark, Bray, Buzz, and Slither

After the World Series

I watch the dog play—she chases a stick,
returning it, again and again—
for the joy in the muscles
and the companion,

now she snuffles in leaves
for the smell of a fallen summer.

I watch the kitten play—he, too, chases
a ball of hunter green yarn—
pouncing, retreating,
forever entertained by the
mysterious unwinding wiggle of things.

I have seen small rabbits roll on one another,
fox kits wrestle,
a dolphin bump a swimmer
and whistle, swimming away,
a gerbil, speedy on his personal
diminutive Nordic track,
the raccoon family who regularly tips
my empty garbage can,
a sparrow splashing
a bird bath of water and sunshine.

There are no winners and losers—

except perhaps for the fruit-ball game
of the spider monkeys,
but they are behind bars in the zoo.

—Maren C. Tirabassi

Prayer attributed to Albert Schweitzer

O God, I thank you for all the creatures thou hast made, so perfect in their kind—great animals like the elephant and the rhinoceros, humorous animals like the camel and the monkey, friendly ones like the dog and the cat, working ones like the horse and the ox, timid ones like the squirrel and the rabbit, majestic ones like the lion and the tiger, for birds with their songs. Hear our humble prayer, O God, for our friends the animals, especially for animals who are suffering; for any that are lost or deserted or frightened or hungry; that we entreat them all the mercy and pity, and for those who deal with them we ask a heart of compassion and gentle hands and kind words. Make us to be true friends to animals and to share the blessings of the merciful. Amen.

Attachment: Activity 9

Playing . . . over an Adder's Den

Dr. John Biggers—Background and Some Questions

Dr. John Biggers, an internationally acclaimed painter, sculptor, teacher, and philosopher, and winner of a UNESCO fellowship that allowed him to travel to Africa, was born in Gastonia, North Carolina, in 1924. Biggers explored his own life and heritage through the study of art at Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) in Hampton, Virginia. Biggers' artistic talent was encouraged and supported by Viktor Lowebfeld. In 1943 while at Hampton, Biggers's work was featured in the exhibition "Young Negro Art," presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Six years later he relocated to Houston, Texas, and established the art department at Texas Southern University, where he served as professor for more than thirty years. Dr. Biggers retired from teaching in 1983 and devoted himself exclusively to his art. The work of John Biggers features significantly in the history of African American art and is represented in private collections and museums. He died in 2001.

[Shotgun, Third Ward #1](#) depicts a scene from Houston's predominantly African American Third Ward community where John Biggers lived—a dynamic community then and to this day. The painting is a good example of Biggers' commitment to portraying African American neighborhood scenes. This is one of his earliest paintings to employ three images that became significant in his later works: the wheel, shotgun houses, and a lighted candle. Shotgun houses are considered an African American form of vernacular architecture. They acquired this name because, supposedly, a shotgun blast fired through the front door would pass straight through the house and out the back. Biggers, instead, suggested that the name is a corruption of the word *shogun*, a Yoruba term from West Africa that means "God's House."

- 1 Do you feel that you know a significant amount of background information about African American artists? What are African American themes in this work and what are truly universal themes?
- 2 Do you feel differently about a place called a "Shotgun House" and "God's House?"
- 3 As you identify the children in this painting, do you experience their joy? a sense of their being endangered by the neighborhood?

Prayer for Children who "play over the adder's den"

For the children who sleep near toxic waste sites, for the children whose porches hear gunfire, for the children who kick soccer balls above landmines, we pray. For the children who feel inadequate in the SATs, for the children who hate the mirror or fear going home to an "uncle," for the children who play games on their cell phones because they have no friends to text, we pray. For _____, we pray. Teach us to play with them and learn from them, paint the reality of their neighborhoods, and light a candle for their future. Amen.

Playing and Living Joyfully



Exploration: Context and Mission

About this Age Group

“The play’s the thing wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king,” (*Hamlet* act 2, scene 2). Shakespeare is right! Adults often experience self-awareness—welcome and unwelcome—as audience members for the life-mirroring mediums of literature, drama, and graphic art. They can uncover even more meaning through the self-engagement of play and worship. That active participation “catches” the conscience and invites the spirit to make a difference in the immediate context and the larger human community.

About this Exploration

Whoever we are and wherever we are, God invites us to play and live joyfully. God calls us to trust self-learning and self-discovery, even though the experience may at times feel awkward. As we become more aware of truth, joy, and tears, and let go of that which is hurting and binding us, we gain a willingness to take discerning risks and find different ways of enjoying God’s creation and life’s daily journey. We release ourselves to the rhythm of the Spirit. In partnership with God and others, we open ourselves to new ways to practice faith in our community and world.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

John 12:20–36

Luke 1:39–56

Leader Preparation

Context is where we are—it’s the home landscape, today’s weather, this life, family, job, retirement, health, collection of gifts, even this church. Mission is where we are going. It can be down the street or across the world, but it is the place we share our gifts of compassion, advocacy for justice, listening. If someone moves body or spirit into the mission place, it isn’t mission anymore—it becomes context. Then the old context may become the mission.

Some people are happier at home plate and some in the outfield. Which are you? Celebrate it. Now consider what it will take to be fully open to both dimensions of joy. After all, it was a pregnant woman (and who is more inwardly focused?) who sang about the upheaval about to be born.

Prayer: *Emmanuel, come to us not only in the Christ mission of the Magi or the Christ context of the manger. Teach us the faithfulness of shepherds who went to Bethlehem with joy and returned home with joy as well. Amen.*

Session Development

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

Exploring & Engaging Activities



1 The Page before the Pageant (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Consider the various participants and their mobility concerns and their willingness to “act” in front of others. Work within people’s “comfort zones,” but at the “let’s challenge ourselves” edge of them.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- costumes (optional)

An argument can be made that people know the nativity story better than any other biblical story because it is embodied. It is the essentially kinesthetic scripture. There are crèches that show the Bethlehem scene, and there are pageants that dress up adults or children to “play the parts.” In addition to the climactic Bethlehem tableau, pageants often include as subscenes the annunciation to Mary, Joseph’s decision of mercy, the innkeepers’ rejection (the Latin American “Las Posadas” embodiment particularly emphasizes this part of the story), the angel choir’s appearance to the shepherds, the Magi’s star-journey and interview with Herod. They almost never include the extremely active and dramatic visit of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth, as Luke records in 1:39–56.

After sharing this introduction in your own words, have the participants read Luke 1:39–56, and invite two volunteers to role-play or act it out. Make a “Director’s Cut” version of the scripture by dividing a piece of paper in two columns. In the right column write the text, with plenty of space between lines. Leave the left column blank and ask people to make some notes for action, emotion, entrances, and exits. They may even add more characters—Mary’s parents, Joseph, silent Zechariah—with their own dialogue (though the person suggesting the addition should be willing to play the part). Share those “re-stagings” or “director’s notes” with the two volunteers and invite them to play the scene again with any additional characters and without their papers. How has the scene changed? Ask: Why, do you think, this important scene is left out of most pageants?

Divide the group into two small groups and have each take half of Mary’s song (Luke 1:47–55) and create liturgical motions that could be used with a reading of it. They will create a visualization of the “story within the story.” Give them only a few minutes and then have them share their movements, perhaps by one person in each group reading and one demonstrating, or by inviting a mirroring from those who are watching. Discuss the experience.



2 A Little Game

Leader preparation: Read or recollect Mark 9:33–37. In this activity we place a child in our “adult group” midst through the written words of a young person and through the image of children. Consider the participants: have any been deployed to Afghanistan in the last ten years? Do any have relatives who have been there? Invite them to share background information they may have when the photograph is discussed.

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

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

Supplies:

- “A Little Game,” Attachment: Activity 2
- poster: “Children Play in the Old Town of Kabul, Afghanistan,” <http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters10>

In preparation for the UCC National Youth Event 2008, which had the theme “Living the Life,” each of the thirty-nine UCC Conferences and the six historically underrepresented groups were invited to have a leader (often the conference minister) and a young person write a story about a time when they had felt God’s presence in their lives. Alex Cook of Framingham, Massachusetts was in eighth grade at the time he wrote a reflection on a mission trip to Tanzania. It was a “little game,” the little game of soccer, that bridged the gap between Alex and young people whose backgrounds were very different from his and whose language he did not know. Read his story.

Suggested questions for discussion:

- Do you think Alex would have made friends without a way to “play” with the children in the village?
- “This game came to show me a bit of God’s power and love in action.” Alex believes that playing soccer was due to God’s intervention, not just his own good idea. Do you agree?
- Have you ever had an experience where a “holy” community was created because of a simple shared activity? Describe the situation.

Find the word “joys” in Alex’s essay. Why did he choose this rather than “mission accomplished,” “hard work,” “anger at poverty”—any one of which could be inserted into the sentence?

Take a look (or another look, if you have used this picture earlier) at “Children Playing in the Old Town of Kabul, Afghanistan, November 26, 2001.” Kabul had already suffered a decade of war by the time this photograph was taken. Discuss how this picture is different because the three boys are playing soccer in the picture, rather than simply walking down the street.

Close with Mary’s Song (Luke 1:46–55) and Alex’s words adapted and mingled in two voices:

Mary: God has shown a strong arm; and has scattered the proud.

Alex: A community is where all different people can meet each other and become friends.

Mary: God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.

Alex: I had sought to share God’s love with them and they had so shared it with me.

Mary: God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

Alex: God’s love can be found in the most unlikely of places—even in something as simple as a game of soccer.



③ **Playing Telephone**

Leader preparation: John 12:20–36 is a complicated passage and is often considered the turning point in John’s Gospel. When the Greeks seek out Jesus, the hour has come for him to be glorified and for the growing conspiracy to kill him. This activity focuses on the listening aspect among the visitors, disciples, and Jesus, and between the voice of God and the crowd. Feel free to let the conversation veer off in other directions in this rich scripture.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- “Playing Telephone Resource Sheet,” Attachment: Activity 3
- poster: “Sisters in the Wind” by Ethan Hubbard, <http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>
- (optional) If using a worship center, cover with a cloth and light one candle surrounded by cell phones, a walkie talkie, an old fashioned telephone, or a blackberry

Begin with the opening prayer for listening found on the resource sheet. While a volunteer is reading it, invite the group to look at Hubbard’s “Sisters in the Wind” and reflect on the listening of those girls. To whom or to what are they listening? the wind? their mother calling them home? Are their whole bodies poised for the listening? Share a few ideas.

Remind people or explain to people who may not know it of the old game of “telephone” (also called Chinese Whispers, Broken Telephone, Whisper Down the Lane, or Gossip), where one sentence is whispered in one person’s ear who whispers it to the next person, and then the next around the circle. At the end the group is amazed at how well or poorly the sentence has survived the repeating (this is a good way to explain some of the differences in strands of the Bible). Use John 12:28b, “Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it and I will glorify it again,’” or John 12:21, “They came to Philip . . . and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’”

After chuckling at the clarity of the listening, ask a volunteer to read John 12:20–36, while the rest think about what kind of passing along of information happens and what quality of listening is needed. This passage falls into two distinct parts. The group may want to pause after verse 26 to discuss the human passing along of information and then after 36 to discuss how people hear and perceive the voice of God. How is this story like a game of “telephone”?

Conclude by picking up one of the cell phones. Invite the group to list in one minute on the resource sheet as many as possible negative aspects of this tool of communication. Then list all the positive ones. Many years have passed but communication is still complicated and conflicted!

Close by passing the cell phone around the circle, with each participant saying, “God, help me to listen to you in . . . [each adds a place or circumstance]. Amen.”

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Send Them to Church? (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Read about a circle of conversation on “A Circle of Conversation,” Attachment: Activity 4. This activity, a formal pattern of answering questions in pairs rather than a more general conversation, avoids the problem of some participants remaining quiet while others speak often. It also allows participants to recall their first response to a question rather than losing the thread in a longer discussion.

Discerning involves a look at the past as well as the present and future. Be careful that this does not disintegrate into a complaining session.

Supplies:

- Bible
- “A Circle of Conversation,” Attachment: Activity 4
- bell to move the conversation along

The group gathers in a circle and counts off for the circle of conversation. If there is an odd number present, you be a partner. If there is an even number, simply watch the group dynamics. First read John 12:20–21. Suggest to the group that the discernment will be about the presence of joy and of Jesus in church, but this is not an evaluation of staff or programs or the first phase of a five-year program. It’s a personal reflection on community joy.

Questions for the pairs:

- When have you experienced the presence of joy, the presence of Jesus, in a faith community context? This could be in the church of your childhood, your current church, or any faith group in between. It could be a camping situation, a Christmas Eve, a college chapel, a wedding or funeral, or an ecumenical gathering. This is a group rather than individual holy experience. There could be many answers—just use “free association” and pick the first that comes into your mind.
- How is the presence of joy, the presence of Jesus, experienced in the worship life of this church? Your response could be a regular occurrence (every time the choir sings) or an occasional one (holidays, baptism). Try to tell a story about a particular occasion.
- How is the presence of joy, the presence of Jesus, experienced in the mission or education, evangelism or stewardship life of this church? Choose only one, though there may be many stories.
- Have you ever felt the absence of joy, the obscuring of Jesus—so you had to run around asking, “Where is Jesus?” in this or a former church? Remember that this is a time of discerning our own relationship with church and not a “gripe session.” Share honestly your own experience.
- As Christians we tell the stories of others, many of them faith stories. With this last partner, please share briefly one of the stories you have heard around the circle. Consider seriously whether you think someone would like you to repeat his or her story and choose one you are confident is “fair to share.” Of course, this is also a test of whether you were really listening to the other person, trying to figure out what you were going to say, or feeling uncomfortable about the church issues being raised.

Invite participants to share insights gained from this process. Close with a prayer for this local congregation in which each person adds a sentence.



5 Pin the Thought on the Picture

Leader preparation: “Pin the Tail on the Donkey” is a blindfold game, but this time it will be played eyes-open as people work to connect thoughts from scripture and song to an image. The following information may be helpful: “Shotgun, Third Ward #1,” <http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>, depicts a scene from Houston’s predominantly African American Third Ward community where artist John Biggers lived, a dynamic community then and to this day. The painting is a good example of Biggers’ commitment to portray African American neighborhood scenes. This is one of his earliest paintings to employ three images that became significant in his later works: the wheel, shotgun houses, and a lighted candle. Shotgun houses are considered an African American form of ver-

nacular architecture. They acquired this name because, supposedly, a shotgun blast fired through the front door would pass straight through the house and out the back. However, Biggers instead suggested that the name is a corruption of the word “shogun,” a Yoruba term from west Africa that means ‘God’s House.’”

Supplies:

- poster: “Shotgun, Third Ward #1” by John Biggers
<http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCRresources>
- “Say It! Sing It!” Attachment: Activity 5
- scissors
- tape

Open by singing (and learning, if the group has not done so) “Say It! Sing It!” Then read Luke 1:39–56, Mary’s way to “sing it and show it.” Distribute scissors to each person to cut the Luke passage and the words of the Miller song into verse-long or shorter strips. Each person will tape a line of text—either from the scripture or the song—to the poster in a particular place and explain why they are connected. Go around until there are no more ideas. (“I would have put it there, too,” is an acceptable response.) Discuss how the three art forms—word, music, and art—illuminate one another. What did the connections help the participants learn? For those who found the activity artificial or difficult, discuss their experience of resistance and whether the resistance was because in some sense the activity dishonored the original pieces or simply because it was a difficult mental process.

6 Home Run

Leader preparation: Context and mission—the place that is “home” and the place we are “running” to offer help sometime seem to have competitive claims on church life. It’s important to understand that in a personal life and the congregational community, people are drawing “All Saints” over and over again. If the group has not sung, “Over My Head, I Hear Music in the Air” take more time learning it.

Supplies:

- “Home Run,” Attachment: Activity 6
- poster: “Allerheiligen” (All Saints) by Wassily Kandinsky, hung on a wall or laid on a table, <http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCRresources>
- song “Over My Head” (African American traditional)
<http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong12>

Discernment is a good time to consider in more depth the distinction between context and mission. You may use this statement from the “Leader Preparation” at the beginning of this Exploration: Context is where we are—it’s the home landscape, today’s weather, this life, family, job, retirement, health, collection of gifts, even this church. Mission is where we are going. It can be down the street or across the world, but it is the place we share our gifts of compassion, advocacy for justice, listening. Some people are happier at home plate and some in the outfield. Which are you?

A poetic explanation comes from Rachel Northrup’s powerful poem about hunger written the school year she was ages 14–15 (see Attachment: Activity 6). Read Luke 1:53 as a counterpoint to this poem: “God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

Yet another explanation comes from viewing the painting by the Russian artist

and philosopher Wassily Kandinsky called “Allerheiligen,” or “All Saints.” In the course of his long and diverse artistic career, Kandinsky painted several interpretations of All Saints, and each of them portrays a wide range of “characters” or “styles” that may not seem to fit together. Read John 12:32 as a counterpoint to this picture: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Engage the group in a conversation about poetry and graphic art and how they illuminate the distinction between context and mission in a different way than any paragraph of definition. Some people may connect with words more strongly while others are drawn to the holiness in the picture. Some might lift up some comparisons between the old artist and the young girl. If the participants do not raise this point invite them to notice that Northrup does not use punctuation and Kandinsky runs the images over the edge of the canvas on to the frame. Both of them make a formal artistic decision to avoid borders.

Discuss context and mission as it relates to this local congregation. It may be helpful to list aspects of the church that are usually defined as context and mission. Are they in competition for volunteer time, funding, or emotional and spiritual energy? What would happen if church was more unpunctuated, unbordered?

Would experiencing the local context and mission as poetry or art help to draw people together? Can a bulletin board, a PowerPoint presentation, or a liturgy of blessing help? Close by praying together: *God of the lifting up and the filling up, you who keep your promises and draw all people, near and far, to you: guide us in our community of faith to compassion and justice under our noses and over our heads. You are our God everywhere. Amen.*

Sing “Over My Head, I Hear Music in the Air.”

Sending & Serving Activities



7 Head, Heart, Knees, and Soul (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Lead the opening kinesthetic prayer seated, if there are any mobility issues. Otherwise standing can be a welcome stretch. There are many musical versions of “Over My Head” available from CD and computer resources, but singing will always be the happiest way to experience this simple “no-critique” song.

Supplies:

- song “Over My Head” (African American spiritual)
<http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSONG12>

Remind the participants of the children’s game “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes.” Learn this kinesthetic prayer: *May my mind be open* (touching head); *may my heart be changed* (touching chest); *may my knees bow down* (touching knees); *my soul lifted up* (raising hands, palms up to the side and front); *and may there always be music in the air. Amen.*

Repeat with these additions:

May my mind be open (touching head) to ____ (they can fill in); *may my heart be changed* (touching chest), so that ____ (they can fill in); *may my knees bow down* (touching knees) *in praise of God, to talk with a child, to confess my sins, to take all my stiffness out; and my soul lift up* (raising hands, palms up to the side and front) so

that I know the path of Jesus before me; and may there always be music in the air. Amen.

Sing together or listen to the traditional refrain to this spiritual, “Over My Head, I Hear Music in the Air.” Ask the participants in what ways in the preceding week they have experienced God as “over their heads,” as in beyond them somehow, and how they have experienced God as “over their heads,” as in present with them wherever they go.

Distribute the call and response version of “Over My Head.” Sing it or speak it together and discuss how these lines deepen one or the other experience of God being “over our heads.”

Leader: Oh, when the world is silent,
People: Hmm, I hear music in the air;
Leader: Oh, when the world is silent,
People: Hmm, I hear music in the air;
Leader: Oh, when the world is silent,
People: Hmm, I hear music in the air;
All: There must be a God somewhere.

Add more verses, such as “When I’m feeling lonely” or “Now when I think on Jesus.” Add your own verses; it only takes a single line to make a new verse!

Read Luke 1:46–56 together. Contrast the two songs: What emotions are expressed? How are they justice songs? What places in our world, our community, our church need to hear one or the other or both of these songs?

Close with a final reading of Mary’s Song verse by verse, pausing between each one for someone to volunteer a line from “Over My Head” so that the two songs sing to one another across the years and into our time.

8 Inch by Inch, Row by Row

Leader preparation: Potentially very sensitive conversations could emerge from this session of discernment. This is a good opportunity to remind people that this faith practice group has a covenant of confidentiality and that all that is shared here is sacred and safe.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- soil
- seeds (spring, summer) or bulbs (autumn) or paperwhite narcissus (winter)

As the group gathers, invite them to plant a seed or bulb. This could be in a small pot or in the ground outside the church.

Read John 12:20–26. The words “planting” and “burying” connote the exact same activity, but they each have a very different emotional import. Jesus suggests in this passage that his own death and the life losses—real and metaphorical—of his disciples are the source of personal growth and, as this insight is connected to Jesus being sought by the Greeks, invitation or evangelism.

Ask each person to recall a time they had to bury something and then discovered that it was really a “planting” because something grew out of it. Some suggestions: letting go of a relationship, giving up something that had become addictive, divorce, leaving a particular school, selling a house to move into an apartment or condominium.

 **9 Mission—Just a Song and Dance**

Leader preparation: This can function as a twenty-minute reflection on mission activity in the past or the mission choices may be set up for this time frame and the reflection take place at the end of them. Possible collective mission activities include walk, rock, dance, fast-a-thon's for charities, a Habitat house day, spring or fall yard clean-up for homebound church members, or "guerilla" gardening (unauthorized planting of flowers or vegetables in median strips). The creativity of the planners can be wide, but keep in mind access for all participants—everyone wants to "do" mission, not "be" mission.

Supplies:

- Bible
- poster: "Joyful Dance" by Diana Ong laid flat on fabric on a low table that forms a worship center, <http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters11>
- ring of votive candles or twistable LED lights

There is an old country expression that chopping wood heats a person twice—once in the exercise of chopping it and once when it is burned in the fireplace or stove. Mission works the same way. Explain that today's thinking about mission will be with the help of a song and dance. Invite the group to look at Diane Ong's painting "Joyful Dance" during a reading of the Magnificat (Mary's Song) from Luke 1:46–55. Each is a portrayal of joy in collective activity—a greater joy than any personal experience. In Mary's case, her joy in the anticipation of the just future is more intense than her joy in her pregnancy.

Invite each participant to share an experience of a mission activity (just completed or sometime in the past) that brought him or her joy. Tell it as a story rather than simply naming it. Most of these will be active, though some members of the group may have taken great pleasure in being a donor for an arts or health or justice or church concern. After each story, light a candle.

Reflect

There was a time when churches were divided like the Bethany sisters (Luke 10:38–42). There were Marys: context people, listeners, Bible students, members of prayer chains; and there were Marthas: mission people, active and engaged. People even spoke of themselves that way. Reflect on the faith practice group and which members previously might have been identified or self-identified as Marys and Marthas. This component has welcomed us into the emotional and spiritual depths of Mary of Nazareth, who brought context and mission together. How has this affected the group—as individuals and as a part of the church? Is there a way to have a synthesis rather than a dichotomy of context and mission in the faith community?

Close in prayer: *Our souls magnify God, who has brought us the joy of our ministry and mission. God has blessed our dance with justice and our song with compassion. God's mercy is on the Bethlehem generation and all generations since that time. God has scattered the proud by silent vigils, and filled the hungry with soup kitchens. God has brought down the powerful with petitions and filled the hearts of all with _____ [name here the mission activities of this group's stories]. God has honored the promises to Abraham and Mary and to each of us, and we hold hands with them and with children's children yet unborn to make a deep music of the heart. Amen.*

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Attachment: Activity 2

A Little Game, by Alex Cook

from *God in My Life: Faith Stories and How and Why We Share Them*

edited by Maren C. Tirabassi and Maria I. Tirabassi,

(Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008)

<http://www.tinyurl.com/29r5ff5>

In the summer of 2007 I had the chance to go on a mission trip to Tanzania. I went with my father and several people from my church. I thought that in Tanzania I would be sharing God's love through talking and praying or through painting buildings and generally helping out. In fact I found that one of the ways I was able to most fully share God's love with others was through a simple game of soccer. Soccer is so amazing because all you need to play is a ball and a couple of people. Anyone can join in and play. This leads to a community where all different sorts of people who don't even speak the same language can meet each other and become friends. This game came to show me a bit of God's power and love in action.

When I got to the village of Pommern, Tanzania, I immediately went outside and pulled out a hacky-sack. The children were amazed at first to see such a thing but after a couple of minutes they moved me on to a game of soccer. Once the soccer ball came out we played nonstop; we played soccer at night and in the day. When I got up in the morning the kids would be waiting outside my door. We became great friends through the game of soccer.

Just before I left Tanzania I received a note from one of my soccer friends. He wrote in broken English, "to mi friend Alex. Thanks for teaching me to play soccer." Upon receiving this note, I nearly cried. I had sought to share God's love with them and they had so shared it with me. The amazing thing was that I did not know any of these children's names or speak their language. But the connection I made with them because of this little game was indescribable. When I left Tanzania I wanted to bring back this sense of community that I had experienced. I am still working on doing that. I think God wants all of us to be open to meeting new and different people and all the joys that come from these experiences. From my time in Tanzania I learned that God's love can be found in the most unlikely of places even in something as simple as a game of soccer.

This essay was written by Alex Cook of Framingham, Massachusetts, when he was in the eighth grade for the United Church Christ National Youth Event, 2008—Living the Life

Attachment: Activity 3

Playing Telephone

Prayer for Listening

God, help me to listen to you in the wind
and the waves and the sunset.
Help me to listen to you
in bray, bark, buzz, and birdsong.

Help me to listen to you
in child's laughter and child's tears,
the conversation of friends,
advice of loved ones,
even sharp words I don't welcome.

Help me to listen to you
in Bible verse, blog, and newscast,
in hymn and hip hop and symphony,
in the rhythm of worship
and the arrhythmia of committees.

Help me to listen to you
in my own blink of eyes, beat of heart.

Help me to listen when you are silent
and I think you have turned away.
God, help me listen hardest when . . .
patient, aching, faithful, praying. Amen

Negative Aspects of Cell Phones (one-minute burst)

Positive Aspects of Cell Phones (one-minute burst)

Closing Prayer

God, help me to listen to you in (my child's words, my friends' advice, nature). Amen.

Or

God, help me to listen to you for (guidance, comfort, calm in my anger). Amen.

Attachment: Activity 4

A Circle of Conversation

from *God in My Life: Faith Stories and How and Why We Share Them*
ed. Maren C. Tirabassi and Maria I. Tirabassi
(Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008)

<http://www.tinyurl.com/29r5ff5>

The group sits in a circle and counts off by twos. A #1 and a #2 speak with each other, responding to a single question. Then a bell is rung and each #1 moves counterclockwise to sit with the next #2 and so on so that everyone has a new partner. The #2s do not move. If a pair is in deep conversation, a #1 can move past that pair to the next available #2 and they will not move till the next round (*sharing the next question as well*). No pair should stay together for more than two rounds.

Give about four minutes—two minutes for each person to answer. Ask four questions, and then, with the fifth partner, share a story that someone else has shared. Remind participants at that time to think about confidentiality and consider which of the stories that they have heard are appropriate to share. This repeating can be hard to do and helps people seriously consider how we talk about one another in other contexts. At the conclusion, spend some gentle time collecting insights from the experience. The whole process takes about forty minutes. (*The shortened version, two minutes per question, takes twenty minutes.*)

Why is this not an icebreaker? This is a serious time of sharing stories, and the regularity of the pattern helps those who hate the chaos of finding someone in a large room and/or being the last chosen. In an icebreaker form of game, people are often more concerned about plotting the next switch than listening to the current partner. In the circle of conversation, each participant also has an opportunity to learn something very interesting about several people—not only the ones with whom he or she would normally sit. There is great comfort in anticipating the next partner and deciding on the level of vulnerability.

Attachment: Activity 5

Say It! Sing It!

$\text{♩} = 132$

If you can say it! Sing it! Let peo-ple know how you feel. If you can

pray it, play it, know it, show it, let them know God's love is real!_____

1. Ma - ny are search-ing for mean-ing, mak-ing their way all a - lone.
 2. We are to help_ one an - oth - er; help one an - oth - er be - long.

Hop - ing that some-one will guide them. In - to the path that leads home.
 Wel-come the weak and the wear - y. Join in the fam - i - ly song.

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Attachment: Activity 6

Home Run . . . Life has them both!

From *Daybook for New Voices: A Calendar of Reflections and Prayers by and for Youth*,
edited by Maren C. Tirabassi and Maria I. Tirabassi
(Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004)
<http://www.tinyurl.com/25a6emj>

A Prayer for the Hungry

I pray for those starving in China
And those without food in Peru
But also I pray for my high school
Because people are starving there too

I pray for those crying from hunger
The children who cry out in fear
And also I pray for the girls that I know
Who cry when they look in the mirror

I pray for the millions who never have food
The famines I see in the news
And also I pray for my friends at my school
Because hunger is something they choose

I pray for the boy with just one cup of rice
and the thin girl I see at the mall
I pray for them both to have something to eat
For they aren't much different at all

So pray for the starving in China
And pray for the girls whose dreams are unreal
Pray that they will never again
Have to suffer from skipping a meal

—Rachel Northrup (who wrote this when she was 14 or 15 years old)

Playing and Living Joyfully



Exploration: Future and Vision

About this Age Group

A common assumption about adulthood is that adults stop “playing make believe.” They should be finished with fantasy. In fact, the long years of adulthood call for two kinds of make believe. Courageous people experience desperate times—difficult diagnoses, unemployment, family dissolution, or loss—and live as if faith is strong when it is shaken or perhaps shattered. They make believe until the “belief” returns. Secondly, future-talk can only be fantasy. Heaven, hope, rapture, and the realm of God are concepts imagined playfully by writers like Tolkien, Lewis, and Pullman out of scripture itself. There are no blueprints for what happens after this life, but still we sit by the bedsides of friends and talk about the most remarkable “dress up” of all—putting on the resurrection.

About this Exploration

We understand from Jesus that the heart of a child invites us into the realm of God. Living and playing joyfully propels Christian congregations, families, and individuals to respond to this invitation with imagination, creativity, spontaneity, wonder, delight, and hope. Thus equipped, we enjoy God’s creation—of which we are a part—and confront adversity, scarcity, and fear. Our joyful living leads us to acts of compassion and social justice; our joyful playing makes space for peace.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

Mark 16:1–8
Psalms 112

Leader Preparation

Spend time daydreaming about the future. Imagine next Christmas—who is present and who is absent? What is really important? What are your feelings? Take several minutes—let this vision affect your practical plans to simplify holiday shopping or reconnect with friends.

Imagine your church community five years from now. What is growing and glowing, and what or who is gone? How is your role different from what it is today? Taste your mingled enthusiasm and regret.

Imagine after your physical death. You may need to move into a deeper state of meditation. Don't censor your wandering mind—streets of gold, tunnels of light, dear friends, the sorrow of those left behind, the disappointment of things not accomplished. What do you see, hear, touch?

In some sense you will be inviting the participants in this practice into similar reflections. This will involve sharing at a very deep level. Alleluia!

Prayer: God, bless our conversations and imaginations with deep joy, honest hope, and many surprises, even as Easter morning was and always is a surprise. Alleluia. Amen.

Exploring & Engaging Activities

 **1 Easter Anytime (Easy Preparation)**

Leader preparation: Easter in October or July or January? We celebrate Easter anytime and read Easter texts because Easter is the meaning of Sunday worship. We celebrate Easter in, say, October, because it is important to detach its meaning from the bulbs, buds, new clothes, and springtime imagery and understand how southern hemisphere Christians perceive Easter as Christ being the first fruit of God's harvest. We celebrate Easter as the message of future and vision because ultimately it is our most unique message, it is our most transforming message, and it is our most welcoming message.

Supplies:

- Bible
- bunny ears for the leader (optional)

Share the statement about Easter any time in the preceding "leader preparation" paragraph, and join in the following gathering litany, inviting members of the group to improvise and contribute the "no matters . . ."

Leader: No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!

Group: And so are you!

Leader: No matter where you are on life's journey—

Group: You are welcome to Easter!

Leader: No matter whether you are old or young, male or female—

Group: You are welcome to Easter!

Leader: No matter your racial or ethnic background—

Group: You are welcome to Easter!

Leader: No matter your sexual orientation or your abilities—

Group: You are welcome to Easter!

Leader: No matter . . . *(have the group fill in)*

Group: You are welcome to Easter!

Leader: No matter . . . *(have the group fill in)*

Group: You are welcome to Easter!

Prayer of Confession: *Gracious God, we confess that we think of Easter as the "spring-time holiday" rather than the mystery holiday, the hope-time holiday, the now-it's-up-to-us holiday. We are more at home with bulbs and bunnies than mortality and resurrection. We confess that we fear speaking about death, and avoid those who are dying or leave their tender care to others. We confess that sometimes we engage in personal and community behaviors that are life-denying. Sometimes we let things die—hopes and dreams, relationships, communities of faith—because we are not willing to claim your tomb-opening power. Accept our repentance and be risen in each of our lives. Amen.*

Assurance of Grace: *Christ, who is greater than a crocus and more loving than can be contained in any holiday or ritual or sanctuary, forgives our sins and changes our hearts. Christ doesn't give us new shoes, but a new way to walk. Amen.*

Invite a volunteer read aloud Mark 16:1–8.

Session Development

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

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

The story goes (and it may be apocryphal) that Rev. R. W. Dale, a pastor in Birmingham, England, at the turn of the nineteenth century, was stuck one year in his Easter sermon. It wasn’t until he realized that the phrase “Christ is living” had never really meant anything to him except “Christ was living way back then, died way back then, and was resurrected way back then” and that things had changed. He figured that his congregation didn’t really believe it either, so he decided to sing an Easter hymn every Sunday until he was sure they understood. His congregation was still singing “Alleluia” when he retired from the ministry many years later.

Discuss how the group feels about celebrating Easter in a different season than spring, even every week. (Each Sunday, after all, is a “little Easter.”) What would the congregation think of an “Easter in October” service with pumpkins and apples instead of lilies? How would they respond to every week having some kind of affirmation of Easter?

2 Picturing Joy

Leader preparation: This activity is messy and fun and takes quite a bit of preparation. Be sure to have adequate clean-up time. You can find the lyrics and tune at <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong10>.

Supplies:

- song “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You/Thee” (tune: Ode to Joy) <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong10>
- four (or more) large pieces of poster board
- glue
- scissors
- collage materials (photo-rich magazines, pieces of cloth, crepe and construction paper precut into shapes, ribbon, or miscellaneous objects—from feathers to artificial flowers)

Invite the group to sing the song once in unison. Assign each of four groups a verse of the hymn and ask them to create a collage to express the verse. This may be quite literal or very figurative—the play is their collaboration with one another. (This could also take place in silence with a group that was very comfortable with one another). There should be no more than four people in each group. Groups of two or three are fine. If there are more participants, create another group for one of the verses.

After ten minutes of working—rather, playing—together, they can show their collages and describe their choices and their process. Close by singing the hymn again.



3 Swing into Spring

Leader preparation: Playful elements of the resurrection may challenge some participants. Reflect prayerfully and personally on the deep joy of the resurrection and the promise it gives to life within life and in life beyond life.

Supplies:

- “Swing into Spring,” Attachment: Activity 3
- plastic Easter eggs
- Mark 16:1–8 (cut up verse by verse without the verse numbers, and fold in Easter eggs hidden around the room)

- more plastic eggs containing single words hope, life, risen, Christ, alleluia, is, mystery, no, death, blessing, good news, joy . . . (repeat words as many times as necessary so that everyone can find an egg)

Invite participants to hunt for Easter eggs until everyone has one (or two if there are extras). Have those who find the scripture read it in the order they think is correct. It is not necessary to correct them, if the passage is slightly off. There may be a sense of surprise. Verse 8 stands out when the text is read this way. Explain that it is the original ending in this first gospel; most scholars agree that the later verses were added at a much later date.

Easter egg hunts are a playful part of Easter. They have come from earlier religions as symbols of fertility and new growth, like lilies and rabbits. They are not part of the faith story, but they are parables. The butterfly with its three-fold life is often used as a parable as well.

In Latvia the Easter “play” custom is swinging. Distribute Attachment: Activity 3, Indulis Gleske’s article on “Swinging into Spring.” Discuss ways in which Jesus’ resurrection, as Gleske suggests, involves a letting go of gravity, a trusting of the fulcrum and—not least—a thrilling ride.

Invite the group into a time of prayer. Ask whether there are any people who have died in the last year and have given over their place on this earth’s swing that should be remembered. Name these people and then ask those who had single words in their eggs to read those words—one at a time—in whatever order they choose so that the words become a prayer.

Discerning & Deciding Activities



4 Winners and Losers (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: It is important to be very clear with the group that the initial exercise is not for sharing. That would inhibit people. Anticipate that some may even be offended at being asked how they are “losers.” Help them to trust the process.

Supplies:

- Bible
- pencils or pens
- pieces of paper, half marked “I am a loser” and half “I am a winner”

Invite the group to begin with a silent writing exercise. Inform them that people have received, randomly, paper that says either “I am a loser” or “I am a winner.” They will each free-write ways in which they see themselves as whichever one they have on their paper—winner or loser—or experiences from the past in which they were winners/losers or how other people see or saw them as winners/losers. The content will not be shared at all!

After several minutes interrupt the writing and ask them how the experience made them feel. Let them share, and then lead into fruitful discussion by using one of these questions:

- How does the random or arbitrary receipt of winner/loser sheets relate to the ways in which people experience good and poor fortune because of health, economics, or country of birth?

- In what ways do young people in our culture experience too many winner/loser distinctions—not only in sports, but in chorus, theatre, band festivals, juried art shows, SATs, even college acceptances? How might it be hard on the development of those who are frequently losers? How might it be hard on the development of those who are frequently winners?
- It would seem that feeling like a winner is good and feeling like a loser is bad, but there is a long Christian tradition for seeing oneself as a loser, as a “sinner” before confession, or as “powerless over” certain things. Reflect on this.

Invite a volunteer to read Psalm 112 aloud, while the group reads silently. Ask for general insights, and then ask whether God’s realm may be the one place where becoming a winner does not require anyone else losing. This is a unique perspective. God would like all to be winners/righteous. It will probably be important to talk about the implications of verse 3: “wealth and riches are in their [the righteous] houses.” What kind of “wealth and riches” does this passage describe? What kind of wealth and riches are found in the houses of people admired by participants in the group—money and prestige, or something else?

Close by asking everyone to turn over their paper and write a prayer, “*God, I am thankful that when I [win/lose—their choice], you are always with me. Amen.*” Invite any who wish to share their prayers.

5 Enthusiastic Acrostic

Leader preparation: In general, people have an easier time thinking well of others than themselves. This will challenge that bias.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- scratch paper
- attractive paper for final versions
- ordinary pencils and pens
- lovely pens or markers for final versions

Claim enthusiasm! The word “enthusiasm” originally meant “full of God” (*theos* is Greek for “God”). In modern English “enthusiasm” means having or showing great excitement and interest, being ardent, passionate, spirited, avid, glowing, eager, or displaying animation. We are all full of God!

Have a volunteer read Psalm 112. This enthusiastic description of a good and just person is one of the nine acrostic psalms—psalms crafted by using the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet in their order to begin a phrase, a verse, or a stanza (Psalm 119 is the longest of these). In the case of this psalm, each line uses the successive letter in the alphabet (roughly two letters per verse). Some English translations, such as the *New Jerusalem Bible*, preserve the acrostic nature of the psalm.

Begin by asking the group to brainstorm their own positive attributes for a minute. Then invite them to turn to their neighbors and offer at least one positive characteristic for each one. These may be new to the list. Rather than using the whole alphabet like the psalm writer did, have each participant print the word “enthusiastic” down the left-hand side of a piece of paper and, using each letter to begin a word, phrase, or sentence, have each person write about him- or herself

and how each one is full of God. (*Hint: the “u” can stand for “usually,” which is a helpful word in this exercise.*) If there is enough time, print out an attractive version with the lovely pens and paper and conclude by any who wish reading their psalms aloud.



6 Two Voices Speak in Spite of Fear

Leader preparation: Two poets from South Africa—one a retired seventy-year-old facing Parkinson’s Disease with her eyes wide open and the other a high school student facing a city full of crime—offer a perspective from which we may learn in our own discerning and deciding.

Supplies:

- Bibles
- “Two Voices from South Africa,” Attachment: Activity 6

Mark 16:1–8, the shorter and probably original ending of Mark’s gospel, ends in a very strange fashion, particularly for a faith practice of joy. Consider the elements of joy and hope for the future in this passage—it is the resurrection and there are many! In spite of these it concludes, “they said nothing, for they were afraid.”

Go around the circle of participants listing contemporary things about which we are afraid: health, finances, situations of family members. Free associate as many as possible.

Two women from South Africa have written poems/prayers about their fears. Isobel de Gruchy is seventy years old and retired, while Naledi Luthuli is still in high school. Read their poems and discuss how they respond to their fears (Attachment: Activity 6). The participants individually may want to reflect on the inspiration they receive. Isobel de Gruchy also offers a version of the Serenity Prayer. Read this and allow a few moments of silence for participants to consider what they might insert into a prayer for their own situation: “*God, give me the serenity to . . . , the courage to . . . , and the wisdom to . . . Amen.*”

Sending & Serving Activities



7 We Can All Be “Tomb Raiders” of the Imagination (Easy Preparation)

Leader preparation: Remember this? This Sending and Serving activity is based on the daydreams in the Leader Preparation at this Exploration’s opening. If you did not have a chance for these reflections earlier, now is a good time!

Supplies:

- writing materials in case participants want to take notes and remember parts of their conversations

Gather the participants into a period that may be quiet meditation, or daydreaming, or “brain-rainbows” (a playful alternative to brainstorming). There will be three completely different ways to reflect on the future. There will be two minutes of silence between each set of imagination invitations.

Imagine next Christmas: Who is present and who is absent? What is really important? What are your feelings? Take several minutes, and let this vision affect your practical plans to simplify holiday shopping or reconnect with friends.

Imagine your church community five years from now. What is growing and glowing, and what or who is gone? How is your role different then from what it is today? Taste your mingled enthusiasm and regret.

Imagine what will happen after your physical death—streets of gold, tunnels of light, dear friends, the sorrow of those left behind, the disappointment of things not accomplished. What do you see, hear, touch? How about your funeral, the visiting hours, the obituary in the newspaper? Are there letters to write for children too little now? A memoir? A spiritual autobiography? Don't censor your wandering mind.

At the conclusion of this time, ask for general insights. Some may find one or the other future dimension easier to pursue mentally, or more elusive. Some participants may have received guidance that may help them and that they wish to share.

If there is time, invite them to divide into three groups according to their own interests. Each group will make some practical suggestions to shape the future of: the next Christmastime for themselves or the church; a five-year planning process for some aspect of the church community; guidelines for wishes after death—literally funeral service planning, discussion of living wills/health care proxies, donation of organs.

Offer results of the smaller discussions. Conclude with this or your own prayer: *God, thank you for our shared time of imagination and our practical conversations. Help us always to experience both the precious and personal intimacy of planning for our futures, and the amazing support of community. Thank you for our honest hopes, our deep joys, and our many surprises, even as Easter morning was and is and always will be a surprise. Alleluia! Amen.*



8 Playing—Not for Children Only

Leader preparation: This activity, which suggests going to visit an assisted living facility or a nursing home, may be uncomfortable for some members of the group who feel threatened by the losses of age or who are fearful that memory may be growing short. Their vision of the this-world future is a bleak one. Others, caring for parents, spouses or friends who live in facilities, may be a resource in finding a place to visit.

Contact a nearby facility and arrange to bring a small group to visit. Usually church groups offer verbal gifts—caroling at Christmas time or leading ecumenical worship. Other churches have parish visitors who visit those with small or no families. This visit is to offer to lead or help with activities either by assisting the activities director or offering to lead a game or art project independently (but always with a staff member present).

Supplies:

- Bible
- “Playing—Not for Children Only,” Attachment: Activity 8
- Bingo, nail polish, and nail polish remover, Nerf balls, bowling sets, art materials, any seasonal craft project items, cooking ingredients (optional)

Ecclesiastes 12:1–7 is an extended—and discouraging—description of aging. It contains metaphors for limited mobility; loss of sight, teeth, and hearing; incontinence; white hair; sexual apathy; and death. In our youth-focused contemporary world the perspective of Ecclesiastes fits right in. Or does it? Joy in life is only over when it is given up. Even the “bogyman” of our era—Alzheimer’s disease—

can contain many moments of joy. The resource sheet contains a poem written after an interview with residents at an Alzheimer's care assisted living facility about this topic. The interviewer asked people with obvious limitations how they played and every single one had a suggestion.

Just as it is for children, play is very important as people grow older. It provides physical therapy for muscles and joints. It engages interest and encourages creativity. Many facilities are frustrated by being short staffed and needing to ask residents to spend more time than is helpful in front of television shows or DVDs. Offering to come and assist or lead playful activities is greatly appreciated.

After the experience, it will be helpful to reflect on it or debrief. Someone in the group may even decide to make the volunteer arrangement a regular part of his or her ongoing sending and serving.

Make Believe I'm Dead

Leader preparation: Consider whether any of the participants have recently lost family and may be sensitive to issues of death. Do not decide not to do this activity for that reason. Talk with them about the activity and engage them as resources.

Supplies:

- writing supplies and implements

"Make believe" has two meanings. On the one hand, it is pretending and, on the other, it is that courageous acting as if one believed and going-through-the-motions until the deeper faith is secure again. Anyone who has experienced a terrible loss in his or her life understands this. This activity ties into both of these meanings, and it can be the basis of an incredible gift to one's family.

The discussion involves planning one's own funeral. It begins with a recognition that the funeral is for those who have cared about someone. (Many a family has been hurt by people who are ill saying "they" don't want visiting hours or a service, when, in fact, those things are about comforting survivors.) This is a conversation, but people may want to take notes in case they want to remember their thoughts.

Suggested questions:

- a. What would you like to have said about the resurrection at your funeral? Does Mark 16 help you with that? What scriptures express important aspects of your life?
- b. What music and instruments—hymns, solos, instrumental pieces, bagpipes, flute—would you like? What poems or readings would express important truths?
- c. Rituals can include photograph boards, sprinkling sand or rose petals, giving people candles or seeds from one's garden, as well as viewing or not viewing a body, open or private ceremonies, flowers or memorial gifts. What rituals are important to you?
- d. What might you write down to say to the people who gather, and who could read your words to them?

- e. Finally, ask about feelings that were raised by this discussion and thank the group for their openness about an incredibly sensitive and holy subject. An expanded version of this brief activity may be something the group could plan for the church or the community, including inviting experts from the funeral profession, hospice, or those who can give legal advice on health care proxies/living wills to form a panel.

Reflect

Science fiction is a wonderful medium for younger and older readers or film watchers to explore the future and dramatize its hopeful or calamitous possibilities. Reading it could be considered a “practice”! But the resurrection—both the transformations within life that happen to people and churches and towns and situations, and the one after life—are not science or fiction. The resurrection in our future and the resurrection that is our vision is a mysterious reality and a realistic mystery and the ultimate source of our living joyfully. Have the participants in this component been able to move beyond treating the future as dutiful resolutions or “fire insurance” and into a play of wonder?

How can this practice of playing and living joyfully become a part of the future vision of our faith community?

Attachment: Activity 3

Swing Into Spring—Easter Custom from Latvia

from the forthcoming book
God in Open Hands: More Worship Resources for the Global Community
edited by Maren C. Tirabassi and Maria I. Tirabassi
(Cleveland: Pilgrim Press)

The northerly country of Latvia, located on the Baltic Sea, experiences large changes in the position of the sun during the year, and the spiritual customs are very much based on the passage of the sun. The spring equinox traditionally was called “Big Day,” but pre-Christian equinox customs now have become associated with Easter.

One of the traditional rituals of this occasion is the hanging of swings, large and small, in towns and in the country. Swings can be as simple as a single board suspended by ropes from a tree branch, or more complex structures with solid frameworks to carry several people. The swings can be erected in a town square, or anywhere, for that matter. Ready-made swing sets, sturdy structures of bolted together logs, are available for instant rental and deployment in house yards or parking lots.

It is expected that swinging will bring good crops, and no doubt is an aid to courtship, as young men take young women for rides, show off their prowess at driving the swings higher and higher. All ages get to ride, as children or older folks are taken as passengers on larger swings.

The swing, like other symbols of passage of seasons or stages of our lives, is governed by laws of nature. Its period has to do with distance from the fulcrum to the center of gravity, and we cannot change that. We get on the swing, and someone gives a gentle shove to start us off. We slightly manipulate the center of gravity by shifting our weight, and make the swing go higher and higher, until we see over the onlookers or the treetops, and feel the excitement, the thrill, and even trepidation as we hang on to the ropes or the frame.

Eventually, we slow down, come to a stop. We relinquish our place to the next couple, and give them a gentle push to start off . . .

For Christians, this time of life’s renewal is marked by the resurrection of Jesus, and as the old customs of Latvia merged with the new, the Easter observation appropriately took on the name of “Big Day.”

—*Indulis Gleske*

Attachment: Activity 6

Two Voices from South Africa

from the forthcoming book

God in Open Hands: More Worship Resources for the Global Community

edited by Maren C. Tirabassi and Maria I. Tirabassi

(Cleveland: Pilgrim Press)

My prayer as one living with Parkinson's Disease

My legs and my hands may be shaky,
 But may my courage and my faith be firm.
My muscles may become stiff and hard to move,
 But may my mind not become inflexible, nor my heart unmoved.
I might lose my balance,
 But may I continue to be balanced in outlook and personality.
My hand-writing may become small and squiggly,
 But may I never become small- or woolly-minded.
My face may take on a deadpan look,
But may I always be able to express joy, love, and peace.
My movements may become slower and slower,
 And may I also become slow to get irritated and lose my cool.
My voice may become very soft and croaky,
But may I not give up on communicating with others.

—Isobel de Gruchy, age 70

Life in My Country

Walking down the street of my country
I observed so much
Lovers, friends, children having fun
I could see they were happy

As I turned around the corner my grin faded
I took a giant step back I felt traumatised

He was raping a five-year old child
She screamed for help but no one helped
I turned around
Only to turn to a gun pointed at me
He commanded all I had or see no tomorrow

I gave him all My cell was gone,
I couldn't call 911, I felt helpless

Crime is our everyday meal
People have no respect for others
Most are miserable and in pain
What had South Africa become

Attachment: Activity 6 (continued)

Self discipline is gone
Violence is a way to make money
We are no longer safe
We don't recognize those in pain

We care only about me, myself, and I
No one is trustworthy
Unity and peace is no more
We do the opposite of what we are supposed to do

But my goal is to change South Africa
Slowly over time
And bring life back into my country.

—Naledi Luthuli, *Inanda Seminary (high school), Durban, South Africa*

Prayer for Wisdom

Lord, we pray,
"Give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed,
courage to change the things that should be changed,
and the wisdom to know the difference."

I also pray,
Give me compassion to help when help is needed,
kindness to stand back when help is not wanted,
and the wisdom to know the difference.

Give me openness to share something of my journey if helpful,
humility to keep quiet if I'm only boasting,
and the wisdom to know the difference.

Give me gentleness to ask concerned questions,
reticence to probe intrudingly,
and the wisdom to know the difference.

Give me willingness to organize and advise freely,
patience to not interfere,
and the wisdom to know the difference.

Give me courage to be honest in my response if that is called for,
Sensitivity to refrain from honesty if that would be more compassionate,
and the wisdom to know the difference.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

—Isobel De Gruchy

Attachment: Activity 8

Playing—Not for Children Only

In your face, Ecclesiastes 12

(a poem based on an inquiry about play at an assisted living facility)

This is the way I play,
says the woman on the bench—
I watch chipmunks, the blue heron, and goldfish
till on the inside
I'm all scamper, stalk, and glitter-swim.

This is the way I play,
says the man who forgets—
I lose at bingo because I'm laughing at a joke.
I get a strike in foam rubber bowling.
I'm glad when someone reminds me
it's not baseball.
I dance to swing band records
with my imaginary wife in my arms.

This is the way I play,
says the woman with hearing loss—
black mittens and soft snow.
The first one with twenty snowflakes
raise your hand.

This is the way I play,
says the man with cataracts—
hide and seek after garlic bread.

This is the way I play,
says the licensed nursing assistant—
I guess who won't be able to sleep tonight—
perhaps I will get out the fuzzy dice,
or listen to a sweet old story.

—Maren Tirabassi