



## 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 Setting

In too many churches today, a “Top Ten” list of the qualities of worship and congregational life would not include “joy.” Some seekers have had ponderous—even wounding—church experiences. Others may have encountered traditions in which the joy expressed seemed shallow and disconnected from the world’s very real suffering and need. These sessions of discovery are designed to celebrate the connection found in the psalmist’s words of praise to God: “You have turned my mourning into dancing . . . and clothed me with joy.”

New participants give the gift of new eyes and ears and hands. We are invited to ask questions together that can enhance and enrich our worship: Why do we do this? Can we try this? Is there a reason for this, or is it just habit? What are the words we all say together each time we gather? Why do we say them? Those who are familiar with the faith community offer the stability of long practice, but remain aware of the dangerous seductiveness of “we’ve always done it this way.” Together the experienced and the beginners can walk the road of faith, learning from each other and from the biblical stories of both testaments. The Holy Spirit guides us through difficulties and awkwardness to trust and interdependence, as we work side by side in the name of Jesus the Christ.

### 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 1:1–2:2**  
**Psalms 30**

### Leader Preparation

Read the scriptures listed above. Note the references to the senses and the invitation to “live in the light” in the 1 John passage, and the images of joy in the psalm.

*Prayer: Loving God, you have created a world abundant with delights to see and touch and taste. Fill me with joy and gratitude for your great gifts and guide me in the way of light. Amen.*

### Session Development

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

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

### Exploring & Engaging Activities



#### 1 Psalm Meditation (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Familiarize yourself with Psalm 30. Arrange chairs in a circle.

#### Supplies:

- Bible
- CD player (optional)
- CD with quiet, meditative music (optional)

Have participants sit in the circle. Encourage them to settle into a comfortable position. Invite them to sit quietly and allow images to flow freely as you read. Play the background music softly as you read slowly through Psalm 30, pausing between each stanza (verses 1–3, pause; 4–5, pause; 6–7, pause; 8–10, pause; 11–12). Allow another minute for the group to sit quietly and listen to the music.

Invite participants to share with one another the richest image that came to mind during the meditation and why it has power for them. If prompts are needed, mention specific phrases from the psalm (for example, “You have healed me”; “Joy comes with the morning”; “You have turned my mourning into dancing”) and elicit images. Close by rereading verses 11–12 as a prayer.

#### 2 Complete Joy

**Leader preparation:** Familiarize yourself with 1 John 1:1–4. Set up the room so that participants can choose a “station,” with writing materials at one, painting supplies at another, and modeling clay at a third.

#### Supplies:

- Bible
- writing paper
- pens
- painting paper
- watercolor paints and/or artist’s markers
- modeling clay

Begin in a circle. Have one participant read 1 John 1:1–4. Invite participants to imagine what “complete joy” looks and feels like. Encourage them to use the senses mentioned in verse 1—seeing and touching—as they think about a moment when they felt flooded with joy and fully alive to all their senses. Invite them to choose a “station” and portray that joy-filled moment in a poem, short essay, painting, drawing, or sculpture. Regather the group, allowing time for sharing about these expressions of joy and their connection to participants’ understanding of God.



### ③ Spectrum Game

**Leader preparation:** Clear a space in a room large enough for participants to be able to line up from end to end. Prepare a set of statements on index cards to which responses will fall on a spectrum of agreement. Begin with fun items such as “I love to play”; “I watch a lot of movies”; “I love pizza”; “I hate broccoli.” Then move to more serious statements such as “I love the church”; “I’m proud to be a Christian”; “I pray without ceasing”; “Joy is a regular part of my life.”

**Supplies:**

- index cards with questions

Invite the participants to stand in a group. Draw an imaginary line through the room and explain that it symbolizes a spectrum of agreement, with the far right side meaning “I strongly agree” and the far left side meaning “I strongly disagree.” Explain that you will read statements and invite the participants to choose a spot on the spectrum that reflects their response to each one. Read the statements one at a time, giving participants time to choose their spots, discussing each one once all have located themselves on the spectrum. Leave enough time for discussion about why some may feel ambivalent about the church, or less than proud about some aspects of Christian history, or why they find prayer difficult, if such responses occur. Where does this intersect with prayer and living joyfully?

## Discerning & Deciding Activities



### ④ Infallible Sign (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Ponder this quote by French philosopher and Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: “Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.”

**Supplies:**

- newsprint or whiteboard and marker
- index cards and a pen or pencil for each participant

Post the quote and attribution in front of the group. Invite each participant to write on an index card “\_\_\_ is the infallible sign of the presence of God.” Give them a few minutes to think about a person, place, or activity that represents joy to them and have them fill in the blank. Discuss the responses and make a list of all these signs of joy. Close the activity with a prayer of gratitude for these many blessings and the enduring presence of God.

### ⑤ “Joyful, Joyful”

**Leader preparation:** Find a recording of “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You/Thee”; or, if the group is able to sing, have hymnals available (tune: Ode to Joy). You can hear the tune and read the lyrics at <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong10>. Gather art supplies.

**Supplies:**

- song “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You/Thee,”  
<http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong10>
- art paper
- paints, crayons, colored pencils, pastels, and/or markers

Play or sing “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You.” Invite each participant to choose an image from the hymn’s abundant variety and draw or paint it. Encourage all to share their pictures with the group and explain why they chose the image they did. End with a prayer of thanksgiving for the extravagant richness of creation.

### 6 Joy of Creativity

**Leader preparation:** Gather a variety of household objects: ball, spoon, clothespin, string, cup, stick, bell, flashlight, playing card, and so forth—enough for each participant to have one.

**Supplies:**

- household objects

Divide the participants into groups of three members each. Hand each group three random objects. Give them a few minutes to invent a new game using these, giving their game a title. Regather and have each small group demonstrate its game to the others. Participants may vote on which they feel is most creative. End with a prayer of thanksgiving for the magnificent imagination of the Creator God, in whose image we are made.

## Sending & Serving Activities

### 7 Statues (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Prepare an introduction to the game.

**Supplies:**

- timer (optional)

Divide the group into two teams. Alternating between teams, have one person come forward and choose others from his or her team to be “statues.” Have the “sculptor” place them in position and pose them so that they form a portrayal of a place, activity, or form of service that represents joy to him or her, while team members try to guess what is being depicted. To add an element of competition, time the answers and award a prize to the team that has guessed the answers in the least amount of time.

### 8 Name the Poster

**Leader preparation:** Display the poster “Children Play in the Old Twon of Kabul, Afghanistan,” <http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters10>, in a place where all the participants can see it. Do not mention the title.

**Supplies:**

- poster: “Children Play in the Old Twon of Kabul, Afghanistan,” <http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters10>
- tape
- an index card and pen or pencil for each participant

Invite the participants to spend a few moments pondering the poster. Ask them to write a title for it on their index card. Then discuss the titles people have imagined, and what they see in the photograph. Share the real title with the group. Emphasize the joy of the children, who are able to play ball in a war zone, and

close with a prayer that such a spirit might permeate the group in the week ahead as they work, play, and serve.

## 9 Holding in the Light

**Leader preparation:** Read 1 John 1:1–2:2.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- index card and pen or pencil for each participant

Read the scripture aloud. Share the common phrase of the Friends, or Quakers—“I will hold you in the light”—as a pledge of praying for someone. Ask each person to write on his or her index card how she or he would like to be prayed for in the upcoming week. Participants may sign their name if they wish, or keep their petition anonymous if they prefer. Place all the cards in the basket and have each member of the group draw one. Make a covenant to “hold in the light” the participant whose card each has drawn by praying each day for that person in the upcoming week.

### Reflect

Joy is contagious. The best way to impart it is to live it. If you bring a joyful spirit to the task, others will see it and enter in.



# Playing and Living Joyfully



## Exploration: Scripture

### About this Setting

Seekers often appear in our congregations having emerged from unchurched backgrounds or bearing the scars of negative experiences of church. Some carry a history of scripture being used as a bludgeon against their beliefs or life choices. These activities are intended to help seekers discover—or recover—the joy of the healing, liberating, welcoming word of God.

### About this Exploration

The history of our faith, recorded in the scriptures, 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

Ponder the scriptures for this Exploration. In particular, focus on the qualities of the followers of Jesus outlined there: the spirit of welcome in Mark 9; the compassion, encouragement, humility, and joy of Philippians 2.

*Prayer: Keep me mindful, God, of the qualities you want your followers to embrace and live. Help me to be a compassionate and humble witness to your love and joy. Amen.*

## Session Development

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

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## Exploring & Engaging Activities



### 1 A Safe Space (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Place seats in a circle so that participants can see one another and engage easily in discussion.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- an index card and pen or pencil for each member of the group

Read aloud Mark 9:30–37. Then reread verse 32: “But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.” Invite participants to write on an index card one question that they were “afraid to ask” in previous churches that they attended or in other religious contexts. When they are finished, ask them to write one question that they still find difficult to ask in church. Collect the cards from all who are willing to submit them. Read the questions aloud one by one; then invite the group into a brief discussion when all have been read. Emphasize that this is a safe place to bring all concerns, that there are no “wrong questions,” and that church is a place where we come not to be fed answers, but to discover the joy of pursuing the questions together.

### 2 Puzzling Joy

**Leader preparation:** On index cards of the same color, write references to Bible verses about joy—one on each card (for example, Psalm 30:5, Isaiah 55:12, John 16:22, Romans 15:13, Philippians 2:2, 1 Peter 4:13, 3 John 1:4). Cut each card into three puzzle pieces and place all the pieces in a basket.

**Supplies:**

- Bibles
- puzzle pieces cut from index cards with Bible references (one piece for each participant)
- basket

Invite the participants to stand in a circle. Pass the basket and invite each person to take a card piece. Give them three minutes to find the other two people whose cards fit together with theirs to form a whole card. Have them sit together, look up their verse in a Bible, and share reflections and stories on how it speaks to them.



### 3 The Beatitudes (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read Matthew 5:1–12.

**Supplies:**

- Bibles
- an index card and pen or pencil for each participant

Read aloud the scripture passage, with a different voice reading each verse. Discuss the startling nature of the beatitudes, which declare as blessed many of life’s most difficult realities. Invite participants to write their own beatitude, based on an event from their own experience: “Blessed are \_\_\_\_\_, for they will \_\_\_\_\_.” Share and discuss.

## Discerning & Deciding Activities



### 4 Extravagant Grace (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read Luke 15:11–32, the parable of the prodigal son.

**Supplies:**

- Bibles

Read the parable aloud, inviting different voices to read each verse. Invite each participant to choose the character with whom they most closely identify in the story and discuss why. Make the points that, in this parable, being out of relationship is equated with death. Like the father's in the story, God's forgiveness is abundant; being part of the family of God is a cause for rejoicing and celebration. End with a prayer of gratitude for God's extravagant grace.

### 5 Who Is the Greatest?

**Leader preparation:** Read Mark 9:30–37 and Philippians 2:1–13.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- old magazines
- sheets of paper
- scissors
- tape and/or glue

Read the scriptures aloud. Emphasize the theme of humility that is found in both. Give the participants time to page through the magazines and cut out pictures that reflect the messages of our culture that contradict Jesus' invitation to humility. For example: we are what we consume; the greatest person is the one with the most possessions, power, and prestige; and so on. Invite each group member to create a collage with the pictures she or he has chosen and then share them with the group. Discuss the challenge of embracing Jesus' countercultural invitation to live humbly.



### 6 To Be Ourselves

**Leader preparation:** Read Mark 9:30–37 and Philippians 2:1–13.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- paper and pen or pencil for each participant
- "Christian Destiny," Attachment: Activity 6

Distribute copies of the quotation from Trappist monk Thomas Merton's *No Man Is an Island*, Attachment: Activity 6, and invite a volunteer to read it aloud.

Invite the participants to ponder what thoughts, dreams, jealousies, and/or myths about their lives keep them from experiencing the joy that comes from simply being oneself and being content to be so. Encourage them to write these on paper. Divide the group into smaller groups of three members each and invite them to share with one another what they have written. Refocus the large group and close by reading aloud Mark 9:35 and Philippians 2:3–8.

## Sending & Serving Activities



### 7 Like a Child (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read Matthew 18:1–5.

**Supplies:**

- paper and a pen or pencil for each participant
- whiteboard or newsprint and marker

Read the scripture aloud. Invite each participant to make a list of as many childlike qualities as she or he can. What does it mean to “become like children”? Then, going around the circle, have each participant name one at a time and list these on the whiteboard or newsprint, until all have been named. Discuss. Focus on the joy, spontaneity, imagination, creativity, generosity, and freedom that are childlike qualities to be emulated—and the struggles we as adults have to maintain these throughout our lives as we take on more responsibilities. Close with a prayer of petition to be more childlike, as Jesus invites us to be.

### 8 Feasting on the Word

**Leader preparation:** Familiarize yourself with the ancient monastic tradition of *lectio divina* (<http://www.valyermo.com> is a helpful resource). Prepare an introduction to the four steps of this form of “feasting” on scripture: 1. listening; 2. meditation; 3. prayer; and 4. contemplation. Familiarize yourself with Philippians 2:1–13. Identify three scripture readers from the group. Place chairs in a circle.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- an index card and pen or pencil for each member of the group

Introduce *lectio divina*. Encourage participants to settle into a comfortable position. Have the first reader slowly read Philippians 2:1–13. Invite the participants to listen for the word or phrase that most speaks to them from the scripture passage, write their one word or phrase on an index card, and meditate on it for a few moments.

For the second reading, invite participants to open themselves prayerfully to what message God has for them in the passage and in their chosen phrase. How does it intersect with their lives right now? Have the second reader slowly reread the scripture. Invite the group into prayerful silence.

Have a third reader slowly read the passage once more. Invite the listeners to ponder what they believe God is calling them to do or be, and how they might serve others in the spirit of humility the passage invites. After a few moments of silence, discuss among the group.

### 9 Write a Parable

**Leader preparation:** Familiarize yourself with the parables of the Bible. Prepare an introduction about Jesus' choice to use these stories of the earth and simple things as teaching tools about the nature of the reign of God. If you have time and interest, get a copy of Clarence Jordan's "cotton patch" translation of scripture such as *The Cotton Patch Version of Luke and Acts: Jesus' Doings and the Happenings*, and read some of the parables in his contemporary version set in red Georgia clay.

#### Supplies:

- Bibles
- Clarence Jordan's *Cotton Patch Gospel* or *The Message* (optional)
- paper and pen or pencil for each participant

Have different voices read a few parables, in a traditional version or Clarence Jordan's *Cotton Patch Bible* or *The Message*. (For example, read Luke 10:25–37, the Good Samaritan; Luke 14:15–24, the Great Dinner; Luke 15:11–32, the Prodigal and His Brother, and so forth.) Emphasize that in his parables Jesus used simple items, activities, and people with which his hearers would readily identify, to make the stories accessible to them. Invite each participant to write a contemporary parable, in a familiar setting, to teach about the nature of the reign of God and the joy of discipleship. Encourage a few people to share their parables with the group.

### Reflect

Take a moment to assess how these activities have gone. Give thanks to God for working through you when they have gone according to plan, and for the lessons in humility gained if/when they have not. Part of living joyfully is "going with the flow" and learning to be grateful in all circumstances.

Attachment: Activity 6

### Christian Destiny

“Our Christian destiny is, in fact, a great one: but we cannot achieve greatness unless we lose all interest in being great. For our own idea of greatness is illusory, and if we pay too much attention to it we will be lured out of the peace and stability of the being God gave us, and seek to live in a myth we have created for ourselves. It is, then, a very great thing to be little, which is to say: to be ourselves. And when we are truly ourselves we lose most of the futile self-consciousness that keeps us constantly comparing ourselves with others in order to see how big we are.”

Trappist monk Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island*

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## Exploration: Discipleship

### About this Age Group

Discipleship is a lifelong journey. This choice comes with a cost, as Jesus made clear, but it also brings great joy. These activities are designed to introduce the seeker or new church member to the joyful elements of faithful discipleship and to the assurance of God's steadfast love on every step of the journey.

### 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.

Hospitality encompasses giving and receiving. Receiving the gift of hospitality from another, even when uncomfortable, embodies receiving God's many gifts to our world.

BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

**Galatians 4:4–7**  
**Revelation 7:9–17**

## Leader Preparation

Ponder the mind-boggling truth that we are all children of God, as the Galatians 4 passage makes clear. Contemplate the good news that the children of God come from “all tribes and peoples and languages,” according to Revelation.

Prayer: *Living and loving God, Mother and Father of us all, make us mindful of your outstretched hand and tender embrace, which are always there at just the moments when we need them. Amen.*

## Session Development

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

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

## Exploring & Engaging Activities



### 1 Children of God (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Familiarize yourself with Galatians 4:4–7.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- whiteboard or newsprint and marker
- paper and a pen or pencil for each participant

Have a participant read the scripture aloud. Give the group a few minutes to ponder individually their experience of God and for each to make a list of as many parent-like attributes of God as they can. Then, going around the circle, invite each participant to name one item from his or her list, compiling one large list on the whiteboard or newsprint as you go. Keep going around the circle, as many times as it takes, until all the attributes have been named and listed. Discuss, and end with a prayer to the loving Parent God.

### 2 In the Image of God

**Leader preparation:** Contact the participants ahead of time and invite them to bring a photograph of themselves as an infant or child.

**Supplies:**

- poster board (one sheet)
- marker
- tape
- sheets of writing paper
- pens

Collect the photographs and attach them to the poster board out of view of the participants, with a number next to each. Then distribute paper and pens, and display the poster board. Give the participants a few minutes to list the numbers and write names next to each, trying to pair each participant with his or her childhood picture.

Together try to guess the identities of the photographs. As each one’s photograph is identified, invite participants to talk about why they chose the particular picture they brought. Facilitate a discussion about the joy that comes from our knowledge of being created “in the image of God.” Invite reflection on how our image of God may have changed over the years, just as we have changed in appearance over time.



### 3 “If I Can’t Dance . . .”

**Leader preparation:** Find some upbeat, danceable music. Display the poster “Joyful Dance” by Diana Ong, <http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters11>, where all the participants can see it.

**Supplies:**

- poster: “Joyful Dance” by Diana Ong, <http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters11>
- CD of dance music
- CD player

Begin with political activist Emma Goldman's quote: "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution." Invite participants to fill in the blank: "If I can't \_\_\_\_\_, I don't want to be part of your church." Discuss. Then encourage the group members to clasp hands and form a circle like the figures on the poster. Play the music and have the group circle several times, then drop hands and dance freely and spontaneously.

## Discerning & Deciding Activities



### ④ Joy of Simplicity (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read Mark 10:17–22.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- paper and pens or pencils for each participant

Invite participants to make a list of all—or some—of their possessions on a sheet of paper, beginning with those that are most important and ending with those that are of least value to them. Read the scripture passage aloud, and invite them to imagine themselves as the rich man in the biblical story. How would they respond to Jesus' command to give away what they have to the poor? Explore the connection between the man's clutching of his possessions and grief.

In this world where the majority of the population survives on the equivalent of less than two dollars per day, we are indeed the "rich ones." How might we recover the joy of simplicity and free ourselves of being "possessed" by our possessions? Encourage each participant to give away one item of value every day in the upcoming week to someone who might need or appreciate it.

### ⑤ Honoring the Saints

**Leader preparation:** Find a large candle and enough tea lights so that each participant can light two or three. Set these up on an altar in the center of a circle of chairs, with the tea lights scattered around the large candle. Find some quiet background music to play.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- altar
- large candle in a holder
- tea lights
- CD and player
- Vincent Harding quote (see following)

Play the background music softly. Read Hebrews 12:1–2. Invite the participants to think about who is in their "cloud of witnesses." What individuals—parents, grandparents, teachers, well-known saints, or unknown neighbors—helped to form them in faith? Invite them to come up one at a time as they feel moved to name one or more, offer a very brief statement about that person's or persons' importance to them, and light a tea light on their behalf. End by acknowledging the light that these saints have shone on the path for us, and the truth that we, too, are called to be witnesses for those who will come after us. Close with this blessing by civil rights historian Vincent Harding: "[This cloud of witnesses] is

a great cheering squad for us. In the midst of everything that seems so difficult, that seems so powerful, that seems so overwhelming, they are saying to us: ‘We are with you,’ and ‘There is a way through; there is a way to stand; there is a way to move; there is a way to hope; there is a way to believe. Don’t give up!’”

## 6 Marks of the True Christian

**Leader preparation:** Familiarize yourself with Romans 12:9–21. Learn the song “Center of My Joy” (Richard Smallwood, William Gaither/Gloria Gaither). You can hear the song at <http://www.tinyurl.com/cdlkmd>. Be prepared to teach it or find someone who can. Identify three scripture readers from the group. Place chairs in a circle.

### Supplies:

- Bible
- whiteboard or newsprint and marker
- hymnals or copies of the song for each participant

Read the scripture aloud. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible calls this passage “Marks of a True Christian.” Ask participants to name some of these marks, such as: love, resistance to evil, perseverance, affection, zeal, joy, patience, generosity, hospitality, empathy, peacefulness, humility, forgiveness, mercy, goodness. List these on the whiteboard or newsprint and discuss them, particularly the ones that are most challenging, such as living in harmony, blessing persecutors, and caring for enemies.

Close the activity by singing “Center of My Joy.”

## Sending & Serving Activities



## 7 All Saints (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Place chairs in a circle and post *Allerheiligen* (“All Saints”), <http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>, by Wassily Kandinsky where everyone can see it.

### Supplies:

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

Give the participants a few minutes to ponder the poster; explain that it is called “Allerheiligen” or “All Saints.” Invite each person to pick one character in the scene with whom they most readily identify. Discuss what they see happening in the poster, and encourage all to disclose their chosen character, explaining why they selected the one they did. End by reading and briefly discussing Revelation 7:9–17.

### 8 “Hunger No More”

**Leader preparation:** Read Revelation 7:9–17. Buy or make breads from a variety of ethnicities and traditions, such as southern cornbread or spoonbread, Navajo fry bread, Middle Eastern pita, Ethiopian *injera*, Indian *naan*, Jewish *challah*, German rye or pumpernickel, Mexican tortillas. Place these on plates and/or in baskets on a table in the center of the group.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- table for an altar
- altar cloth (optional)
- the breads
- baskets and/or plates

Read together Revelation 7:9–17. Invite the participants to share their reactions to the passage. Discuss what it would be like to live in a time when people “will hunger no more, and thirst no more.” Emphasizing that people of every tribe and nation will be present in John’s vision of the end times, bless and break the bread. Invite each participant to come forward one at a time and take a piece of bread of choice, offering a word of thanks as each does so. You may wish to invite folks to take some of the bread home after your gathering.

### 9 “From All Tribes”

**Leader preparation:** Read Revelation 7:9–17. In advance of this session invite each participant to bring a food that is part of his or her ethnic tradition, or a dish that she or he particularly favored as a child. Set up tables so that everyone can have a seat at one.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- table(s)
- plates and utensils
- serving spoons
- table decorations such as tablecloth, flowers (optional)

Invite everyone to be seated around the table(s). Read the scripture. Emphasize the presence in John’s vision of “all tribes” and the promise of a day when people “will hunger no more, and thirst no more.” Invite participants one at a time to stand and tell a brief story about the food each brought to share: its connection to ethnic origins or tradition, or a memory of childhood joy associated with it. After each story, pass around that dish and partake, until everyone has had her or his turn. End with a prayer of thanksgiving for the joy of diversity and shared abundance.

## Reflect

God is lavish in grace, mercy, patience, and compassion toward us—as a parent is toward a child. In what ways did you reflect God’s love toward those in your care during these activities?



# Playing and Living Joyfully



## Exploration: Christian Tradition

### About this Setting

Some seekers have left church for a time because of the mixed nature of Christian tradition. The Inquisition and the Crusades; witch-hunts and imperialistic missionary endeavors; church sanction for slavery and sexism; the Holocaust; and homophobia—all these stand as part of our history as surely as the best examples of Christian service, advocacy, and resistance to evil. The activities in this Exploration are designed to remind seekers and new church members of the beauty and richness of the positive aspects of our tradition in music, prayer, scripture, and witness.

### 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.



## Exploring & Engaging Activities

**BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:**  
**Isaiah 11:1–10**  
**Song of Solomon 2:8–13**

### Leader Preparation

Throughout Christian tradition, a “shoot” is always emerging from a “stump”—new life blossoming from what appears dead, hope following despair, resurrection coming on the heels of crucifixion. Ponder Isaiah’s beautiful and startling image of the “peaceable kingdom,” where all creatures live in harmony and a child is in charge. Imagine God being smitten with a love for you that is as fervent and giddy as that portrayed in Song of Solomon.

*Prayer: Holy God, allow me to rest in the assurance of your unconditional love for me, and help me to dedicate my heart, mind, and soul toward the coming of your reign of peace. Amen.*

### Session Development

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

#### 1 A Love Letter from God (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read Song of Solomon 2:8–13.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- a sheet of paper and pen or pencil for each participant

Invite the participants to write love letters to themselves from God, highlighting their particular gifts and graces. What would God say to each person in particular? Emphasize that only the writer and anyone with whom she or he might choose to share the letter later will see it. When they have finished, talk together about how it felt, whether it was easy or challenging to identify their gifts and to trust God’s love for them. Read Song of Solomon 2:8–13. End with a prayer acknowledging each person as a beloved child of God.

#### 2 “Canticle of the Sun”

**Leader preparation:** Familiarize yourself with the life of St. Francis of Assisi and his “Canticle of the Sun” (available at <http://www.prayerfoundation.org>). A musical version of this canticle is a hymn titled “All Creatures of Our God and King” (tune: Lasst Uns Erfreuen). You can hear the tune and read the lyrics at [Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.](#)

**Supplies:**

- “Canticle of the Sun,” Attachment: Activity 2
- hymnals or printed copies of “All Creatures of Our God and King” <http://www.tinyurl.com/2bxkbc>
- paper and pens or pencils

Read aloud the “Canticle of the Sun,” going around the circle and having different voices each read a stanza. Invite the group to discuss moments of joy and awe they’ve experienced in connection with the beauty of God’s creation. Then encourage each to write a canticle of praise, and have all who are willing share these with the group.

Sing a version of “All Creatures of Our God and King.”

#### 3 Water of Life

**Leader preparation:** Read Mark 1:9–11, the account of Jesus’ baptism. In advance of this session invite participants to bring water from a place special to them (a lake, stream, spring), or simply tap water in a vessel that has special meaning (a vase, mug, jar). Set chairs in a circle with a bowl on an altar in the center.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- water that the participants bring, or water you have provided
- large decorative bowl
- table for an altar
- altar cloth (optional)

- 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.

Invite participants to talk about the circumstances of their baptisms, if they have been baptized, or their feelings about baptism if they have not. Affirm all manner of baptism (infant, adult, sprinkling, immersion). Some may be curious about the differences. You may want to invite the pastor to address these questions. Discuss briefly the Christian sacrament of baptism, and the centrality of water as a symbol of death and rebirth.

Invite them one at a time to come forward and pour their water into the bowl, saying a brief word about the water and/or the vessel they brought. Make the point that we each have a unique gift to bring, and that together we become one, as the water becomes one. Go around the circle, calling each person by name, and offering the blessing from the scripture that God bestows on all God's children. ("Sophie, you are my daughter, the beloved; with you I am well pleased"; "Evan, you are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.")

### Discerning & Deciding Activities

#### 4 "Over My Head" (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Ponder the hymn "Over My Head" (African American traditional). Compose some brief words of introduction about the use of hymns throughout Christian history as preparation for, and encouragement during, difficult times, emphasizing that this piece was sung frequently during the civil rights struggles in the 1950s and 1960s. Be prepared to lead the song, or find someone among the group who can.

You can read the lyrics at <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong12>. To hear a choir sing the song, go to <http://www.tinyurl.com/FPSong12a>.

#### **Supplies:**

- copies of the hymn "Over My Head"

Offer your words of introduction. Invite the group to sing the four verses of the spiritual that are printed in the hymnal. Then invite them to add their own verses, calling out one phrase at a time for the group to sing in place of the phrase "hear music." Invite a discussion about the use of music in their lives for inspiration and encouragement, and as a sign of the presence of God.

#### 5 Cloud of Witnesses

**Leader preparation:** Read Hebrews 11:1–12:2. Prepare a summary of verses 2 through 32. Ponder this quotation from Annie Dillard's "An Expedition to the Pole," found in *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters*: "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church. We should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares. They should lash us to our pews."

#### **Supplies:**

- Bible
- a variety of hats, one for each participant, such as a straw hat, velvet hat, crash helmet, hard hat, Santa cap, baseball cap, fishing hat, and so on

Have each participant choose a hat to wear. Read aloud Hebrews 11:1. Offer your summary of verses 2 through 32. Then read aloud verses 32 to 40, followed by

Annie Dillard's quote. Briefly discuss the aspects of Christian history that included persecution for faithfulness and courage, and Dillard's assertion that we have become "tame" in our understanding and practice of faith. Emphasize verses 39–40, reminding the listeners that those who went before us are counting on us to continue their witness. Encourage participants to share about how they might move from being "velvet hat" Christians to "crash helmet" Christians. End by reading aloud Hebrews 12:1–2, reminding all of the joy of following God's call, even in difficult times, and the "cloud of witnesses" that always surrounds and encourages us.

### ⑥ Centering Prayer

**Leader preparation:** Familiarize yourself with Fr. Thomas Keating and his work on centering prayer (see <http://www.tinyurl.com/347tlv>). Prepare a brief introduction to centering prayer. Place chairs in a circle.

**Supplies:**

- introduction
- "Centering Prayer," Attachment: Activity 6
- bell or gong

Offer a brief introduction to centering prayer, ending with the Keating quotation. Encourage participants to get comfortable and take a moment in silence to choose their one- or two-syllable sacred word (for example, Jesus, God, mercy, faith, stillness, trust, love). Invite them into a period of centering prayer, reminding them when distracted by thoughts or sensations to return gently to their chosen word. Ring the bell or gong to begin the prayer and to end it. Allow significant time—at least 5 to 10 minutes—for centering prayer. This can seem like a very long time to some folks! Allow a few minutes for participants to share about how this experience felt. Close by repeating the Keating quote.

## Sending & Serving Activities

### ⑦ Conversation with a Saint (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Choose a saint or ancestor in the faith with whom you would like to have a conversation (perhaps Moses, Mary, Peter, Francis of Assisi, Julian of Norwich, Mother Theresa, Dorothy Day, Sojourner Truth, Martin Luther King Jr.). Research the figure you've chosen.

**Supplies:**

- newsprint or whiteboard and markers
- paper and a pen or pencil for each participant

Invite the participants to name some saints or ancestors in the faith. These may be biblical figures or historical figures or more contemporary figures. List these on newsprint or whiteboard. Have each person choose a name from the list. Divide the group into pairs. Take turns in the pairs creating a conversation with the chosen saint or ancestor. What questions might you ask? What are you curious about? What do you want to learn from this saint? (For example: What did it take in your life to be faithful? When did you stumble? How did you discern God's call in your life?) Encourage all who are willing to share their conversation with the group. End with a prayer of thanksgiving for these witnesses to faith, courage, and justice.

### 8 Holy Anointing

**Leader preparation:** Read Mark 14:3–9. Familiarize yourself with the Christian tradition of anointing. Place chairs in a circle around the table, with the oil placed on top.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- altar with cloth
- olive or other oil in a small container

Read together the scripture about the anointing woman. Discuss the story and the place of anointing in Christian tradition as a sacred act of hospitality and honoring. Go to the table and invite a participant to come forward. Pick up the oil and anoint that person on the forehead with a circle or sign of the cross, offering words of blessing and affirmation. Give the oil to him or her, and have the others come up one at a time, receiving an anointing and then turning to anoint the next person—so that everyone both receives and gives a blessing.

### 9 Peaceable Kingdom

**Leader preparation:** Familiarize yourself with the ancient monastic tradition of *lectio divina* (<http://www.valyermo.com> is a helpful resource). If the group has not engaged in this type of exercise before, prepare an introduction to the four steps of this form of being with scripture: 1. listening, 2. meditation, 3. prayer, and 4. contemplation. Read Isaiah 11:1–10. Identify three scripture readers from the group. Place chairs in a circle.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- index cards
- pens

Introduce, or review, *lectio divina*. Encourage participants to settle into a comfortable position. Invite them to listen during the first reading for the word or phrase that most speaks to them from the scripture passage. Have the first reader slowly read Isaiah 11:1–10. Have participants write down their one word or phrase and meditate on it for a few moments.

For the second reading, invite participants to prayerfully open themselves to what message God has for them in the passage, and in their chosen phrase, and how it intersects with their lives right now. Ask the second reader to reread the scripture slowly. Invite the group into prayerful silence.

Ask the third reader to read the passage slowly once more. Invite the listeners to ponder what they believe God is calling them to do or be, and how they might work toward the vision of peace and harmony that the scripture portrays. After a few moments of silence, discuss among the group.

## Reflect

Use these sessions as a reminder of why you've chosen to be a follower of Jesus. Be encouraged that for two thousand years, Christians have been adding to the powerful witness of our tradition. Give thanks that you too are part of that rich stream of history.

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Attachment: Activity 2

**Canticle of the Sun**

St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226)

Most High, all-powerful, all-good Lord,  
All praise is Yours, all glory, honor, and blessings.  
To you alone, Most High, do they belong;  
no mortal lips are worthy to pronounce Your Name.

We praise You, Lord, for all Your creatures,  
especially for Brother Sun,  
who is the day through whom You give us light.

And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor,  
of You Most High, he bears your likeness.

We praise You, Lord, for Sister Moon and the stars,  
in the heavens you have made them bright, precious, and fair.

We praise You, Lord, for Brothers Wind and Air,  
fair and stormy, all weather's moods,  
by which You cherish all that You have made.

We praise You, Lord, for Sister Water,  
so useful, humble, precious, and pure.

We praise You, Lord, for Brother Fire,  
through whom You light the night.  
He is beautiful, playful, robust, and strong.

We praise You, Lord, for Sister Earth,  
who sustains us  
with her fruits, colored flowers, and herbs.

We praise You, Lord, for those who pardon,  
for love of You bear sickness and trial.

Blessed are those who endure in peace,  
by You Most High, they will be crowned.

We praise You, Lord, for Sister Death,  
from whom no one living can escape.

Woe to those who die in their sins!  
Blessed are those that She finds doing Your Will.  
No second death can do them harm.

We praise and bless You, Lord, and give You thanks,  
and serve You in all humility.

Attachment: Activity 6

## Centering Prayer

by Bette J. Shellhorn, Ph.D. (source: <http://www.tinyurl.com/34f4zzx>)

Centering prayer is a method of prayer designed to develop contemplative prayer. Contemplation is not meant to replace other forms of prayer. However, it can bring a new perspective to the other methods of prayer. Centering prayer gives you a fresh sensitivity to God's presence everywhere, all of the time.

God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—lives in the center of your being. Centering prayer allows you to experience God's presence now, to be touched by God where you need it the most, and to be transformed in your inner being by the God who loves you.

### How to Do Centering Prayer

1. Sit quietly and relax. Enjoy your own inner silence. Be calm. God lives in the midst of your silence. Listen to hear whatever God wants to share with you. Savor God's presence and open your heart, allowing yourself to be touched by God in the deepest part of your heart.
2. Respond to God's presence with an act of faith. Do not allow your thoughts or feelings to get in the way. When thoughts come into your mind, gently let go of them and focus on a single word, such as "Jesus," "Lord," "Love," or a phrase that is meaningful to you, such as "Jesus Christ, Son of God have mercy on me," "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." This sacred word or phrase is a symbol of your intention to allow God's presence and action within you.
3. Put your faith and love into the word or phrase. Whisper it softly. Repeat it slowly and effortlessly, letting it lead you more deeply within your being. God is in you and you are in God. Surrender to God's refreshment and re-creation.
4. Center your attention and desire on God. Leave your thoughts and feelings peacefully. Let Jesus draw you into his perfect prayer of adoration, love, and praise. Let it happen. Don't try to force it; simply go with God's leading. Whenever you become aware of any distracting thoughts or images, gently return to your word or phrase.
5. When you end this prayer time, move slowly to a silent awareness of God and then move to a conscious prayer such as the Prayer of Our Savior. Say it slowly. Savor the words. Listen to their meaning and make them your own.
6. Centering prayer may be used once or twice daily for 20 minutes. If you are faithful to pray, you will soon experience the fruits of the Holy Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self-control. You will abide in God and God in you.

Nothing is more beautiful than the uniqueness that God has created:

You don't have to create the beauty —you've got the beauty.

You don't have to create the freedom —you've got it.

You don't have to create the image of God in you —you have it.

You don't have to win over God's love —you have more than you know what to do with.

From Thomas Keating, "Centering Prayer," in *Heartfulness: Transformation in Christ*, a DVD/audio series on the spiritual journey (Butler, N.J.: Contemplative Outreach)



# Playing and Living Joyfully



## Exploration: Context and Mission

### About this Setting

While he was still in her womb, Mary understood and proclaimed the mission of her most amazing child, who would usher in a reign in which the proud would be scattered and the lowly lifted up, the powerful would be put off their thrones and the hungry fed. This is the mission that we who are followers of Jesus inherit as we seek to live as Christ's church in the world.

### 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

Ponder the image of radical social upheaval in Mary’s “Magnificat” and picture a world in which everyone has enough. Take to heart John’s words: “Whoever serves me must follow me” (John 12:26a).

*Prayer: God, who sometimes leads us where we do not want to go, give me strength and courage to follow you. God, who hears every cry, help me to be an instrument of your justice and joy this week. Amen.*

## Session Development

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

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

## Exploring & Engaging Activities



### 1 The Mission of Joy (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** In advance ask each participant to bring an object to this session that is symbolic of a moment of joy they’ve experienced, such as a shell from a favorite beach, a toy kept from childhood, a grandchild’s artwork, a souvenir from a special trip. If this is not possible, begin the activity with drawing. Place chairs in a circle around a table.

**Supplies:**

- table
- paper and crayons or markers
- altar cloth (optional)

Invite participants one at a time to stand and tell a brief story about the object each has brought, and then place it on the altar. If it was not possible for a participant to bring an item, invite that person to draw a picture of an object that is symbolic. Or, have those persons check their wallets and purses for an item that represents joy. Many people carry photos of loved ones, have credit cards to favorite stores that enable them to give gifts, or carry a driver’s license that allows them freedom of movement and the ability to provide for others. End with a prayer of thanksgiving for the joy that fills our lives, and a petition that as followers of Jesus we might embrace the “mission” of joy.



### 2 “If You Can Say It, Sing It”

**Leader preparation:** Learn the song “Say It! Sing It!” by JoEllen Miller. Be prepared to teach it to the participants, or find someone in the group who can.

**Supplies:**

- copies of the song “Say It! Sing It!” Attachment: Activity 2
- whiteboard or newsprint and markers
- marker

Sing together “Say It! Sing It!” several times. Point out the invitations to mission that the song’s two verses embrace: guidance, companionship, aid, hospitality, community. List these on the whiteboard or newsprint. Invite the group to come up with as many other aspects of mission as they can. Encourage them to “sing it” rather than say it, by singing out one word at a time such as compassion, mercy, justice, charity, generosity, and so on. List these as well. Close by singing “Say It! Sing It!” again.

### 3 “I Have Asked...”

**Leader preparation:** Read 1 Samuel 1:1–20. Place chairs in a circle. Find meditative music to play.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- CD and player

Encourage the participants to settle comfortably. Play the background music softly. Read the scripture aloud and invite the group into a time of silence. Ask them to think about a time in their lives when they desired something that would bring them great joy, as Hannah desired a son. Was their prayer answered? In the way that they hoped? Stay in a meditative mood with the music playing softly. Encourage anyone who is willing to briefly name aloud a desire that he or she would like to have prayed for—for him- or herself or a loved one. Have the group pray for each named petition in silence. End with a prayer of assurance that God hears all our petitions.

## Discerning & Deciding Activities



### 4 Going with Haste (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read Luke 1:39–56.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- paper and pen or pencil (optional)

Read aloud the scripture. Emphasize that Mary went “with haste” to see Elizabeth, as we are likely to do when we have exciting news to share with a loved one. The deep connection between these two women was such that John “leaped in [Elizabeth’s] womb” at Mary’s greeting. Invite the group to do some imagining about the three months these two miraculously pregnant women spent together. How did they support each other? What was the nature of their conversations? Who rubbed whose sore feet? If the group likes writing, invite them to write a brief story about what might have gone on. Invite a few participants to share their stories. End with a prayer that celebrates our need for connection, community, and support—and the joy that comes from reaching out to one another.

Option: Invite volunteers to take the parts of Mary and Elizabeth and act out a conversation that might have occurred over breakfast.



### 5 Name the Poster

**Leader preparation:** Place chairs in a circle and display “Shotgun, Third Ward #1” by John Biggers, <http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>. Do not mention the title of the poster.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- poster: “Shotgun, Third Ward #1” by John Biggers, <http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>
- tape
- index card and pen or pencil for each participant

Invite the participants to spend a few moments pondering the poster. Ask them to write a title for it on their index card. Then discuss the titles people have imagined, and have them describe what they think is happening in the poster. Point out the various people portrayed and discuss what each might be feeling. Draw particular attention to the children in the street. Close by reading Psalm 30:11–12 as a blessing.

### 6 God Has Done Great Things for Me

**Leader preparation:** Read the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke and familiarize yourself with the details surrounding the conceptions of Jesus and John the Baptist: Elizabeth's old age, the birth pronouncements of the angels, the doubts of Zechariah and Joseph, the angelic reassurances about fear, Mary's openness.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- paper and a pen or pencil for each participant

Have a participant read aloud Luke 1:39–56. Invite a discussion about the details surrounding the miraculous pregnancies of Elizabeth and Mary, emphasizing their faithfulness in the face of fear. Encourage each participant to remember a time when she or he felt fear or uncertainty about a decision, and how God honored that decision. Give time for each participant to write his or her own song of praise, enumerating the “great things” God has done for them in the form of Mary's “Magnificat.” Encourage all who are willing to share theirs with the group.

## Sending & Serving Activities



### 7 A Conversation with Jesus (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read John 12:20–36.

**Supplies:**

- Bible

Read aloud the scripture and allow a period of silence for reflection on this challenging passage about life and death, service and sacrifice. Invite the participants to role play a conversation between him or her and Jesus, in which the person asks whatever she or he wants, and Jesus responds. One person asks a question and the other answers. Before asking the question, each person writes an answer on a card. Then, in pairs, one asks Jesus a question, and the other person (as Jesus) answers. The card can then be read to see if Jesus answered the way the first person had hoped. Go around the group. When done, debrief with questions such as: What was it like to ask the question? What was it like to answer as Jesus? How did the questioner feel if he or she got a different answer than hoped for? How did it feel, as Jesus, to please or disappoint with your answers?

### 8 Collective “Magnificat”

**Leader preparation:** Read Luke 1:39–56. Consult news sources such as magazines and newspapers, radio and TV broadcasts, and the Internet to learn about pressing justice struggles occurring locally, nationally, and internationally. In advance, invite participants to bring to this session clippings about such events that they discover through the week.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- two poster boards
- tape
- index cards and a pen or pencil for each participant
- news clippings illustrating pressing justice issues, or the world and local news sections of a recent newspaper or weekly magazine

Make sure that each participant has a news clipping, either from home or from the extras you have brought. Read together Luke 1:39–56. Make the connection that Mary’s joy about giving birth to Jesus was related to a coming reign of justice for everyone. Invite each person to write on an index card one stanza based on her or his clipping, beginning with “God has . . .” (for example, “God has heard the cries of the migrant workers in North Carolina”; “God has provided shelter for abused women in our city”; “God has given a new home to the refugees in Darfur”) or “God will . . .” (“God will bring marriage equality to our state”; “God will bring peace to Afghanistan”). Invite each participant to tape his or her clipping on one poster board to form a “collage of justice.” Then tape the index cards, one beneath the other, on the other poster board. Have the participants stand, gather around the poster boards, and read together this collective “Magnificat” litany.

### 9 Foot Washing

**Leader preparation:** Read John 13:1–14.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- large basins or bowls
- towels
- water

Have foot washing stations set up around the room—one for every six participants. Fill the basins with warm water and lay towels beside them, in front of chairs. Read the scripture to the group. Emphasize that foot washing was a gesture of hospitality, humility, and service in Jesus’ time. Have participants go to the stations, kneel to wash the feet of someone, and then trade places to allow the next person to wash his or her feet. When everyone has participated, end with a petition to be followers of Jesus’ example of humble servanthood.

## Reflect

Ponder these difficult and startling words from John: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. . . . Whoever serves me must follow me.” How have you served Jesus this week? Where has Jesus led you?

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Attachment: Activity 2

### Say It! Sing It!

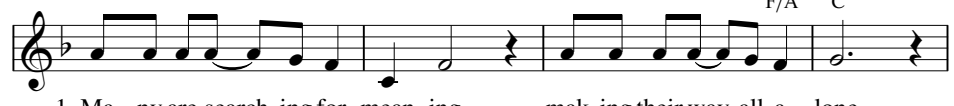
$\text{♩} = 132$



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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# Playing and Living Joyfully



## Exploration: Future and Vision

### About this Setting

The world is infused with resurrection hope. This is the promise that the church offers to those who seek to join it. In that assurance—come what may, whatever evidence we may observe to the contrary—we find our joy. The world today is not as it was, and is not as it will be. Thanks be to God!

### 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

Read the resurrection story in Mark 16:1–8. Try to imagine the “terror and amazement” the women at the tomb felt. Let the good news sink in: Jesus has conquered all the powers of death. What joy!

Prayer: *God, whatever comes my way this week, help me to live by resurrection hope. Amen.*

## Session Development

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

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

## Exploring & Engaging Activities



### 1 Spreading the Good News (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read Luke 24:1–12. Place chairs in a circle.

**Supplies:**

- Bible

Read the scripture aloud. Remind the hearers that women were considered unreliable witnesses in Jesus’ time, their testimony inadmissible in court. Therefore, it was no surprise that the apostles considered the women’s announcement of the resurrection “an idle tale.” Invite the participants into playing the childhood game of “Gossip.” Have a volunteer start a statement around the circle, whispering it quickly to the person beside her or him, passing it along until the last person repeats to the group what she or he heard. Repeat this exercise as time allows. End with the points that we have several biblical versions of the resurrection; that the good news would have been passed from person to person and altered or embellished much as phrases are in “gossip”—but that the truth remains that Jesus rose from the dead, a cornerstone of our faith.

Some phrases to get the group started:

- Pizza tastes great.
- Ally alligator ate eleven avocados in the afternoon.
- Garlic suppresses vampire’s desires.
- Ministry and mission motivate martyrs to passionately articulate their faith.



### 2 Looking Forward

**Leader preparation:** Display the poster “Sisters in the Wind” by Ethan Hubbard, <http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>, in a place where all the participants can see it.

**Supplies:**

- poster: “Sisters in the Wind” by Ethan Hubbard, <http://www.tinyurl.com/UCCResources>
- tape
- paper and pens

Invite the group into a time of silence for pondering the poster. Invite each person to create a story about what she or he sees. Where are the sisters? What are they looking at, or for? What are they feeling? Encourage a few people to read their stories to the group. Facilitate a discussion about what members of the group are hoping for as they look toward the future, and where they expect to experience joy.

### 3 Do Not Worry

**Leader preparation:** Read Matthew 6:25–34. Place chairs around a table, with art supplies in the middle.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- table
- painting paper
- watercolor paints
- artist’s markers and/or crayons
- modeling clay

Read slowly through the scripture. Discuss worry as one of the greatest obstacles to joy, and invite participants to share their experiences. Then have them create a reminder for themselves that God can be trusted to provide all that is needed in life. For example, they might form a bird or lily out of clay or paint. Encourage them to place their object in a prominent place in their home. Close by rereading the scripture.

## Discerning & Deciding Activities



### 4 Committee of Joy (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Ponder this story: In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Central American country of El Salvador was torn apart by civil war. Many people fled from the violence to neighboring Honduras for safety. Upon arriving in their new country, they immediately organized three committees: the construction committee, the education committee, and the *comité de alegría*, or committee of joy. One refugee woman explained to Yvonne Dilling, a church worker from Indiana, after they had endured a harrowing escape across a river under helicopter gunfire and suffered the loss of many people from the woman’s community, that for Yvonne to stay with their struggle long-term she would have to learn to celebrate. “Partying,” the woman said, “is as important to us as building latrines and teaching our children to read and write.”

**Supplies:** None

Read or retell the story of the Salvadoran refugee woman. Invite participants into a discussion about times in their lives when they were confronted with hardship and “made a decision for joy”—and how that choice affected their capacity to envision a brighter future and carry on through the difficult time.



### 5 “Dancing ‘Til Dawn”

**Leader preparation:** Arrange chairs in a circle. Display “Dancing ‘Til Dawn” by Marianne Millar, <http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters12>, so that all can see it.

**Supplies:**

- poster: “Dancing ‘Til Dawn” by Marianne Millar, <http://www.tinyurl.com/AllPosters12>
- Bible

Invite the participants to get comfortable and settle into meditative silence. Read aloud Psalm 30 slowly, pausing between each stanza. Allow more silence for par-

Participants to ponder the images that have emerged for them. Then draw their attention to the poster. Reread verse 5b: “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” Encourage participants to share stories of times when they experienced doubt, grief, or loneliness, and how they rediscovered joy by “looking to the dawn,” like the women in the poster.

### Rolling Back the Stone

**Leader preparation:** Read Mark 16:1–8. Set chairs in a circle with a small table in the center.

**Supplies:**

- small table
- flat, light-colored stone for each participant
- markers
- altar cloth (optional)

Invite someone to read the scripture. Give a stone and marker to each member of the group and invite each to write on one side a word or phrase in answer to the question, “What stands in my way of experiencing completely the joy of Jesus’ resurrection?” Then have them turn over their stones and write a word or phrase in answer to the question, “What strength do I possess that I can use to roll away this challenge and experience joy more fully?” Encourage all who are willing to step forward one at a time with their stone, briefly explain their answers, and place their stones on the table in a pile with the others, creating an altar of self-awareness and hope. End with a blessing of the altar.

## Sending & Serving Activities



### Psalm 112 Acrostic (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read Psalm 112.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- paper and pen or pencil for each participant

Have one participant read aloud Psalm 112. Explain that the psalm is an acrostic, each line or verse beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Have each participant write the letters of his or her first and last name vertically down the left margin of a sheet of paper (those with short names may also want to include their middle name). Invite the participants to write a psalm of praise about themselves, celebrating their gifts and strengths, using the letters from their names to start each line. Any who find this too challenging can be encouraged to simply list words of description about themselves using the letters. Encourage all who would like to share their psalms with the group to do so.



## 8 The Great Banquet

**Leader preparation:** Read Luke 14:16–24.

**Supplies:**

- Bibles

Read the scripture aloud, going around the circle and having different voices each read a verse. Allow people to pass if they are not comfortable reading in front of others. Introduce the image of the “welcome table,” where all are invited and everyone has a place, as one image of heaven. Emphasize that it is the people who typically live on the margins of society who are particularly welcomed. Have the group discuss times when they have stepped out of their “comfort zone” and crossed social boundaries to meet, serve, or be served by people of a different race, class, or faith. What did they learn, and where did they experience joy in such encounters?

## 9 The New Shorter Ending of Mark

**Leader preparation:** Read Mark 16:1–20.

**Supplies:**

- Bible
- paper and a pen or pencil for each participant

Read aloud Mark 16:1–8. Point out to hearers that this is considered the “shorter ending” of the Gospel of Mark. Most scholars believe verses 9–20 were later additions to chapter 16 and do not belong with the original text. Invite participants to write their own ending to the resurrection story. Where did the women go from the tomb? To whom did they tell the good news? What was the reaction? Encourage a few people to share their stories with the group. Close by reading Mark 16:9–20 and comparing this version with the ones that people wrote.

### Reflect

Ponder the psalmist’s surprising words: “Happy are those who fear God, who greatly delight in God’s commandments.” How do we “delight” in realities we experience as rules or obligations? How does our relationship with God affect our response to God’s will for us?