



# Praying and Making Ritual



## Exploration: Discovery

### About this Setting

The United Church of Christ has roots in multiple Christian traditions. Our identity as a multiracial, multicultural, peace-with-justice, open-and-affirming, accessible-to-all community of faith infuses our practices of prayer and ritual with a richness of depth and an array of possibilities.

### About this Exploration

Prayer is a way to seek and find God. Rituals mark the time and space where we encounter God, and through those rituals we recall the story and share it with others. Prayer and ritual are expressions beyond ourselves. Prayer and rituals go beyond words. From a fearful cry in the dark to the joyful laughter of celebration, prayer is an expression of our heart. From the reflex of folded or outstretched hands in prayer to the complexity of liturgy, ritual is a pattern etched into our lives. The activities of this exploration will help participants discover the patterns of prayer and ritual that are already a part of their faith practices and to experience them in fresh ways.

## BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

**Joshua 4:1–24**  
**Psalm 23**

## Leader Preparation

The Bible Focus Passages for this Exploration offer a couple of familiar biblical images of God. In Joshua 4:1–24 the people are reminded of God’s mighty acts, in the way in which God had served as a mighty warrior on behalf of the people during their escape from Egypt. In Psalm 23 God is a gentle but strongly protective shepherd. As you prepare to engage in learning alongside your group in these activities, consider your own images of God. Which do you find most comforting? Which are less helpful to you at times? Spend a few moments focusing on your own more comforting ideas about God, and then say the following simple prayer of thanks.

*Prayer: God of new discoveries, thank you for the many ways that you provide us to draw closer to you through ritual and prayer. Amen.*

## Session Development

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

## Exploring & Engaging Activities



### ① Images of God (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read Joshua 4:1–24 and Psalm 23. Reflect on the images of God found in these passages.

#### Supplies:

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

Have volunteers take turns reading Joshua 4:1–24 aloud, and then invite the group to reflect on the images of God found in this passage. As they share their insights, make a list on newsprint or a whiteboard. Have one or more volunteers read Psalm 23 aloud and do the same as you did with the Joshua passage. Allow a few moments for everyone to reflect upon which of these images are helpful and easy to relate to and which are not. Ask the participants to share why they feel the way they do about these images of God. Invite them to add to the list other images of God that they are familiar with or have been particularly helpful to them. Invite the participants to write a prayer to God using the image they find most helpful. Encourage them to carry that imagery through in their prayer. Allow for sharing of prayers for those who would like to do so.

### ② The Bay Psalm Book

**Leader preparation:** The Puritan worship of our seventeenth-century Congregational forebears focused on a number of components. One of the most important was the singing of metrical psalms. In 1640 the precursor to The Pilgrim Press published *The Bay Psalm Book*. Congregational ministers in New England wrote and edited this metrical version of the Book of Psalms we find in the Hebrew Scriptures. They did so based upon their beliefs that the scriptures ought to be in understandable language and that the psalms themselves were the only appropriate source of church hymns and singing. A look at some of the psalms in the book, found online at “The Bay Psalm Book,” shows how loose the ministers’ translations were. Pay special attention to Psalm 23. *Note:* You will have to scroll down a bit to get to Psalm 23. Using the page view settings on the interface helps, but the book is not paginated.

#### Supplies:

- Bibles, in a variety of translations and paraphrases, if possible
- Psalm 23 from “The Bay Psalm Book” for each participant  
[http://books.google.com/books?id=Fn48yVYkqvAC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Bay+Psalm+Book&source=bl&ots=Tflm6-c-d&sig=Fyabisp8q\\_Hj81cy8C17uJDGT2E&hl=en&ei=lqplTKXwGcT\\_lgfGhICTDg&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CDUQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=Fn48yVYkqvAC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Bay+Psalm+Book&source=bl&ots=Tflm6-c-d&sig=Fyabisp8q_Hj81cy8C17uJDGT2E&hl=en&ei=lqplTKXwGcT_lgfGhICTDg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CDUQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q&f=false)
- paper and pencils

- 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 the participants to read Psalm 23 aloud from the different translations or paraphrases available. Introduce them to *The Bay Psalm Book* and its history. Give everyone a copy of Psalm 23 from the online “The Bay Psalm Book.” Invite participants to write a paraphrase of Psalm 23 using their own experience as the setting of the psalm: “The Lord is my . . .” Invite folks to share their psalms.

### 3 Down to the River to Pray

**Leader preparation:** Watch the YouTube video “Down to the River to Pray.” Also look at the lyrics to the song. Consider the ways that Joshua 4:1–24 and Psalm 23 can show us “the good ol’ way” mentioned in the song.

#### Supplies:

- Bibles
- computer and Internet access
- digital projector
- video: “Down to the River to Pray”  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H\\_exx2shFqM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_exx2shFqM)
- printout of lyrics for each participant, found at “Down to the River to Prayer” Lyrics, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H\\_exx2shFqM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_exx2shFqM)

Show the video “Down to the River to Pray.” Have volunteers take turns reading Joshua 4:1–24 and Psalm 23 aloud. Give participants a copy of the song’s lyrics and invite them to consider the ways that these scripture passages show us “the good ol’ way” mentioned in the song.

## Discerning & Deciding Activities



### 4 Encountering God in Worship (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Reflect on a typical worship service in your setting. Think about when you feel closest to God during the service. Gather copies of a typical bulletin or make an outline of worship for your congregation for each participant.

#### Supplies:

- copy for each participant of a worship bulletin or outline of worship for your congregation

Give folks a copy of a worship bulletin or an outline of worship, and invite them to reflect on the worship service of your congregation. Ask them to think about the times they feel closest to God during worship. Ask them to share what feelings or emotions those moments elicit. Invite them to reflect on and describe why they think these times make them or allow them to feel God’s presence during worship. Ask them to consider the same questions about when they do not feel close to God in worship and what feelings or emotions those times elicit. Ask them to consider what it is about these times and how they are similar or different to the times they feel closer to God in worship. Point out that it is not God who has moved or changed. Invite the participants to reflect on how they have moved or changed during worship.



### 5 One at Baptism

**Leader preparation:** The United Church of Christ affirms two sacraments, baptism and communion. Although these sacraments were ordained by Jesus himself during his earthly ministry, early Christians were able to find foreshadows of baptism in the Hebrew scriptures. One of these foreshadowing events, the crossing of the Jordan River, is recalled in Joshua 4:1–24.

Go to the webpage “We are One at the Baptism and at the Table” and read the story of Rev. Dr. James Fouthier (about half way down the page under the heading “People Matter”). Reflect on the questions posed in red concerning James Fouthier’s and your own experience of baptism. Be aware of your congregation’s particular practices of baptism.

#### Supplies:

- copy for each participant of James Fouthier’s story under “People Matter,” found at “We are One at Baptism and at the Table,” <http://www.ucc.org/vitality/what-matters/we-are-one-at-baptism-and-at.html>

Review Rev. Dr. Fouthier’s experiences as they relate to the sacrament of baptism. Recall some of your own experiences of baptism, such as your own, a child’s, or grandchild’s. Invite group members to share their own experiences or their questions about baptism. Engage the group in conversation using the questions posed in the article about James Fouthier as well as the following questions.

- What are ways that you see James Fouthier expressing the sacraments in his own life?
- If you have been baptized, what do you know about the event? What has it come to mean to you?
- Do you have any tokens of remembrance from your baptism or a family member’s baptism? If so, what are they?
- What is your prayer for James? After hearing his story, what might God be saying to you?



### 6 Imaging Baptism

**Leader preparation:** Look closely at “The Baptism of Christ” by Pheoris West. Respond viscerally to it. How does it make you feel? What mood do you see in the face and physical stance of Jesus in the work? What other parts of the picture raise a response from you? How and why?

#### Supplies:

- artwork: “The Baptism of Christ” by Pheoris West  
[https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/261288992?VIEW\\_PRODUCT=true&product\\_id=15627&store\\_id=1401](https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/261288992?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15627&store_id=1401)

Display “The Baptism of Christ” by Pheoris West. Invite the group to look closely at the picture, but do not identify the title yet. Ask them for their first impressions and what they think the picture portrays. Tell them the title and if your group is primarily white, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, or Pacific Islander, ask them how this painting challenges their image of Jesus and his baptism. Invite them to consider how this portrayal of Christ calls them more deeply to be the multiracial, multicultural church the United Church of Christ seeks to be. Invite participants

to look around your meeting space or church for other artistic representations of Jesus and reflect on the differences among these representations. End your session by praying a prayer that we may indeed become the multiracial, multicultural, peace-with-justice, open-and-affirming, accessible-to-all community of faith God seeks us to be through Christ Jesus.

### Sending & Serving Activities



#### 7 Wash, O God, Our Sons and Daughters (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Invite an accompanist to play the tune “Beach Spring” as the participants sing “Wash, O God Our Sons and Daughters.” Use hymnals if this song is found there or make copies of the lyrics. Set up a small worship space with a table, cloth, Bible, and bowl of fresh water.

##### Supplies:

- Bibles
- prepared worship space
- hymnals with “Wash, O God Our Sons and Daughters,” or a copy of the lyrics, found at “Wash, O God, Our Sons and Daughters” lyrics, <http://www.justsomelyrics.com/823745/Oleta-Adams-Wash,-O-God,-Our-Sons-%26-Daught-Lyrics>
- accompanist and piano
- bowl of fresh water

Gather in a circle around a prepared worship space. Invite the group to read Psalm 23:1–3 aloud together. Invite the participants to imagine for a moment times in their lives when they have needed cool, still waters and God has led them to such. Invite the participants to sing together “Wash, O God Our Sons and Daughters” and, as they feel so moved, move forward and dip a hand(s) in the fresh water, remembering the cool, still water that God has led them to and remembering their baptisms. End by praying this prayer together: *Thank you God, for the fresh waters of your grace.*



#### 8 Processions

**Leader preparation:** Spend time looking at “Guatemala: Processions” by Betty La Duke and see what images you find.

##### Supplies:

- Bibles
- artwork: “Guatemala: Processions” by Betty La Duke  
[https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1801449515?VIEW\\_PRODUCT=true&product\\_id=15626&store\\_id=1401](https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1801449515?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15626&store_id=1401)

Draw the group’s attention to “Guatemala: Processions” by Betty La Duke, and invite them to take a few minutes to view it. Engage the participants in conversation about this picture using the following questions.

- What do you notice about the textures, colors, and tones in this picture?
- In what sort of mood do the people in the painting appear to be?
- Who, or what, do you think are the disembodied faces suspended on the dark columns that frame the central figure?
- Who do you think the central figure may be or represent? Why?

Invite volunteers to take turns reading Joshua 4:1–24 to the group. Reflect together on what this event might have meant to the Hebrews. Have the participants take another close look at the painting in light of the scripture passage from Joshua 4:1–24. Ask them how they think the Hebrews looked and felt as they processed across the Jordan River and into the land promised their ancestors by God.

Invite the group to think of times during a worship service in which your congregation takes part in or experiences a procession. Ask them to consider the following questions about processions in your congregation.

- When are these times?
- Who is present in the procession?
- Who watches “from the wings”?
- What do such processions represent to you and to those in your congregation?
- What promises kept (or broken) are represented in your procession(s)?

If time allows, plan a procession for an upcoming special occasion in the life of your faith community, and follow up by seeking the support of congregational worship leaders in carrying it out.

### 9 Waking up to God

**Leader preparation:** Take a look at the website “8 ways to wake up to God,” <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/your-life-better/wake-up-to-god/>. Be prepared to share this resource with your group and explore ways in which they experience God in everyday life.

#### **Supplies:**

- computer with Internet access
- digital projector

Invite the participants to explore the website “8 ways to wake up to God.” Invite them to share which ways resonate least and most among your group. Invite them to share other ways in which group members can and do wake up to God every day.

### Reflect

Which prayers, songs, rituals, activities, liturgy, or scriptures did you find most meaningful in this Exploration? Why? Which did you find least meaningful? Why?

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# Praying and Making Ritual



## Exploration: Scripture

### About this Setting

Prayer and ritual grow out of the example and witness of scripture. As a church that proclaims that “God is still speaking,” scripture continues to be important to us as we seek deeper communion with God and one another in prayer and ritual.

### About this Exploration

Scripture is filled with stories of how faithful people make ritual and offers helpful and diverse models of prayer. David modeled an outpouring of praise and thanksgiving. The disciples saw how Jesus’ ministry flowed out of his prayer life. They asked longingly, “Lord teach us to pray.” Jesus provided them with a prayer that is still used by many people of faith today. We do not have to fear or wonder if our prayers are acceptable to God. We can know that God welcomes and delights in our conversation.



## BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

**Luke 11:1–13**  
**1 Chronicles 29:10–18**

## Leader Preparation

Sometimes reading the Lord's Prayer as it appears in Luke's Gospel can be jarring. It is certainly not the liturgical version that we often pray in worship. That one is based more on Matthew's version of the prayer. Take a few moments to read Luke's version (11:2–3) a couple of times. Meditate on what you see, feel, imagine, and experience through the words. Now engage each petition of the prayer as it is in Luke, asking yourself these questions:

- “hallowed be your name”—In what ways do you and can your fellow learners hallow God's name in these activities and outside of this learning setting?
- “Your kingdom come”—How has God's kingdom come in your life, in the life of your faith community, in the life of your wider setting, and in the world, and how can it continue to do so more and more?
- “Give us each day our daily bread”—In what ways has God provided, or perhaps not provided, for your physical, emotional, and spiritual needs in the past and the present?
- “And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us”—What does forgiveness look like? How does it feel? Have you been forgiven? Have you forgiven yourself or others?

## Exploring & Engaging Activities



### ① Standing in the Need of Prayer (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** We all need prayer. The disciples asked Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). The African American spiritual “Standing in the Need of Prayer” (tune: Need Of Prayer) speaks of our deep desire to pray and to be prayed for. It is hymn #519 in *The New Century Hymnal*. Invite an accompanist.

#### Supplies:

- *The New Century Hymnal*, another hymnal that includes “Standing in the Need of Prayer”
- (optional) copy of the song's lyrics for each person, found at “Standing in the Need of Prayer” lyrics, [http://www.gospelsonglyrics.org/songs/its\\_me\\_o\\_lord\\_standing\\_in\\_the\\_need\\_of\\_prayer.html](http://www.gospelsonglyrics.org/songs/its_me_o_lord_standing_in_the_need_of_prayer.html)
- accompanist and piano

Invite the group to sing “Standing in the Need of Prayer.” Consider singing it in the call-and-response style in which it was originally sung by having your most confident, or willing, singer(s) take the lead part, with everyone else chiming in on the responses and choruses. When finished singing, invite the participants to consider the times that they most stood in the need of prayer. Ask them to share how praying helped them at these times. Invite people to share times in which they have been prayed for and how that made them feel.

If you are a bold and brassy group, ask your local music or worship leaders if you can sing this song at a worship service!

### ② The Lord's Prayer— \_\_\_\_\_ Style

**Leader preparation:** Check out the online “The Lord's Prayer—Australian Style” by Tod and Ana Gobledale, missionaries with Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ. Be prepared to share it and pray it aloud with your group.

#### Supplies:

- computer with Internet access
- digital projector
- copy of “The Lord's Prayer—Australian Style” for each person  
<http://www.globalministries.org/eap/missionaries/the-lords-prayer-australian-1.html>
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Introduce the group to and pray together aloud “The Lord's Prayer—Australian Style.” Discuss the differences between this version of the Lord's Prayer and the one you normally pray together in your congregation. As a group, using the Australian Style as a model and the version of the Lord's Prayer you more typically pray, write a version of the Lord's Prayer for your location, region, or group. Entitle it the “Lord's Prayer— \_\_\_\_\_ Style.” Consider using it in a worship setting.



- “And do not bring us to the time of trial”—What has or will the “time of trial” look like in your life? In your fellow learners’ lives?

Consider jotting down some notes as you engage Jesus’ prayer and these questions so that you might use them later for further spiritual growth.

Prayer: Pray the Lord’s Prayer in the form most familiar to you.

### 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.

### ③ Shaped by Prayer

**Leader preparation:** Through the United Church of Christ’s Web presence at <http://www.ucc.org/>, we are blessed to be able to access “Weekly Seeds,” <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/weekly-seeds/>, a free, weekly Bible study based on the texts of the Revised Common Lectionary. One such study for July 19–26, 2010, “Shaped By Prayer,” <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/weekly-seeds/>, addresses the Bible Focus Scripture for this Exploration, Luke 11:1–13. Take a look at focus passage from Luke, and then look at the “Focus Questions.” Consider signing up to receive “Weekly Seeds” yourself.

#### Supplies:

- Bibles
- computer with Internet access
- digital projector
- copy of Shaped By Prayer “Focus Questions” for each person <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/weekly-seeds/shaped-by-prayer.html>

Invite volunteers to read Luke 11:1–13 to the group. Give everyone a copy of the focus questions for the study “Shaped by Prayer.” If you have a large group, divide into small groups of three or four people. Invite the participants to have a conversation considering each of the “Focus Questions.” After awhile, bring the group back together and share any insights from the conversations. Encourage everyone to consider signing up to receive the online “Weekly Seeds,” <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/weekly-seeds/shaped-by-prayer.html>.

## Discerning & Deciding Activities



### ④ The Lord’s Prayer? (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Take a moment to engage or review the questions in the Leader Preparation section for this Exploration. Be prepared to walk your group through the steps of the activity.

#### Supplies:

- Bibles
- journal or small notebook for each person
- pens and pencils

Together, read Luke 11:2–3. Reflect and discuss ways this differs from the Lord’s Prayer used in your congregation’s worship services. Give everyone a journal or small notebook and a pen or pencil. Tell them that you are going to take them through a guided journaling process in which you will say a petition of the Lord’s Prayer and then pose a question for them to write about in their journals. Suggest that they write down the petition as you state it and the question if they wish. Use the following petitions and questions to lead this activity.

- “hallowed be your name”—In what ways do you hallow God’s name in your life?
- “Your kingdom come”—How has God’s kingdom come in your life, in the life of your faith community, in the life of your wider setting, and in the world and how can it continue to do so more and more?

- “Give us each day our daily bread”—In what ways has God provided, or perhaps not provided for your physical, emotional, and spiritual needs in the past and the present?
- “And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us”—What does forgiveness look like? How does it feel? Have you been forgiven? Have you forgiven yourself or others?
- “And do not bring us to the time of trial”—What has or will the “time of trial” look like in your life?

When you are finished, it is all right if the participants do not share what they have written. Sometimes, and for some people, an activity can be an intrapersonal activity, something done with one’s own thoughts and reflections. Those who feel a need to share will do so at another time.

### 5 Persistence

**Leader preparation:** After Jesus teaches his disciples his model prayer, he begins to teach them about persistence in prayer. Read a story of persistence online at “Tips from the Triathlon,” from Rev. Bob Molsberry (Ohio Conference Minister). Think about persistence in your own life based on both Jesus’ teachings about prayer and Rev. Molsberry’s recounted experience of the Ironman Triathlon. Where has persistence paid off in your life? Where has it not? Where could you use more persistence?

#### Supplies:

- Bibles
- copy of “Tips from the Triathlon” for each person  
<http://www.ocucc.org/PDF/TipsFromTheTriathlon.pdf>

Invite a volunteer to read Luke 11:5–13 to the group. Discuss the stories of persistence Jesus shares. Hand out copies of “Tips from the Triathlon,” which tells Rev. Bob Molsberry’s story of persistence. Invite the participants to read the article silently, or have people take turns reading a paragraph at a time to the group. Engage the group in a conversation about persistence using the following questions.

- Where has persistence paid off in your life?
- Where has it not?
- Where could you use more persistence?

Invite the group to create a litany for persistence. Have them decide on a phrase that all will repeat as a response to each petition of the prayer. Then invite each person to come up with her or her own petition for persistence based on that person’s life and experiences. Pray the prayer together taking turns with the petitions and all responding after each petition.

### 6 An Order for Special Occasions in a Church's Life

**Leader preparation:** The *Book of Worship of the United Church of Christ* contains an order for special occasions in a church's life. Wait for a special time in the life of your congregation when a new item will need to be dedicated. Be prepared to share the resources from "An Order for Special Occasions in a Church's Life" (pp. 260–267) with your group, and arrange with worship leaders to allow members of your group help lead the liturgy. Obtain a copy of *Book of Worship of the United Church of Christ*. If you cannot borrow one, you can purchase it as a loose-leaf, pocket-sized book or find it online.

#### Supplies:

- *Book of Worship of the United Church of Christ*  
[https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1408379401?FOLDER=1700&store\\_id=1401](https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1408379401?FOLDER=1700&store_id=1401)

Tell the group that although David would not see the Temple completed, it was certainly a special occasion when the gifts for its construction were dedicated. Invite a volunteer to read 1 Chronicles 28–29. Invite participants to look at "An Order for Special Occasions in a Church's Life" in the *Book of Worship of the United Church of Christ*, pp. 260–267. If there is a particular special occasion coming up in your congregation, invite the group to talk about it and how they might use a liturgy to mark this occasion. If your group has been invited to participate in the worship service, explain their part and have them work on what they will be doing. If there are no special occasions coming up, invite the group to be creative and make up an occasion they can celebrate. Have them plan a service to mark this occasion.

## Sending & Serving Activities



### 7 Thanks and Praise (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read 1 Chronicles 29:11. Note especially the last clause of this verse of David's prayer: "[Y]ours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all." The Preamble to the Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ, <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/constitution-of-the-ucc.html>, reads in part: "The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior." Under Article 5 it continues: "The basic unit of the life and organization of the United Church of Christ is the Local Church." What this says is that what happens in your local congregation is of the utmost importance to the United Church of Christ as a whole! Think about things your church has to be thankful for, and be prepared to write a prayer of thanksgiving and praise with your group for use in your worship service.

#### Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Together read 1 Chronicles 29:11. Share the following quotation from the Preamble of the Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ: "The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and



Savior.” Under Article 5 it continues: “The basic unit of the life and organization of the United Church of Christ is the Local Church.” Explain that this means that what happens in their local congregation is of the utmost importance to the United Church of Christ as a whole. Together discuss and reflect on what your congregation has to be thankful about. As a group, write a prayer of thanksgiving and praise for use in a local worship service.

### 8 Totenfest

**Leader preparation:** Take a look at the online resource about holding a Totenfest, and consider how your group might use some of these ideas, either within your group or with your wider congregation.

#### Supplies:

- Bibles
- copy for each person of resources for holding a Totenfest, found at Totenfest, <http://www.ucc.org/assets/pdfs/totenfest.pdf>
- newsprint
- markers

Explain that in David’s prayer of thanksgiving and dedication of the gifts gathered to build the Temple that he himself will never see, he mentions Abraham, Isaac, and Israel (Jacob)—ancestors gone, but not forgotten. Invite a volunteer to read 1 Chronicles 29:10–18 to your group. Give the participants a copy of the resources for holding a Totenfest, and invite them to look these over and decide how they would like to celebrate this feast, either within the group or with the wider congregation.

When all pieces are placed, invite people to consider whether their initial idea about what was going on in the picture is consistent with the end result. Finally, invite them to consider the connections between this picture and the emotions that are shared between Elijah and Elisha at their parting. *At what points in our church’s history have there been difficult good-byes?* For example, if several congregations came together in 1957 to form a new church, each congregation would have left behind who they once were as a church to embrace something new. This was true for individual congregations as well as for the former denominations. *What other losses or good-byes has our church experienced—losing members, moving buildings, deaths?* Even positive change requires some good-byes.

*Prayer: Eternal God, you know how hard it is to say good-bye, and thus you offer us eternity so that we will never have to say good-bye to you. Thank you for meeting us in the place of our greatest need. Remind us as we say our good-byes that you are always beckoning us toward new tomorrows. In Christ’s hope, we pray. Amen.*

### 9 Planning a Worship Service for all God’s People

**Leader preparation:** When David prepared for the building of the Temple, he gathered only the officials, officers, commander, stewards and warriors together to worship. In our time, it is of vital importance that we gather all God’s people together for worship. Does your church include children in worship? If so, the resources in this activity can be easily adapted for your use. If not, strongly consider using the resources to make a special time in which all God’s children can

worship together. It would be advisable to include pastoral and other worship leaders in your plan before using this activity in your group.

### Supplies:

- Bibles
- worship planning resources
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Invite a volunteer to read 1 Chronicles 29:10–18 to the group. Point out that when David prepared to ready for the building of the Temple, he gathered only the officials, officers, commander, stewards, and warriors together to worship (1 Chronicles 28:1). Suggest that in our time, it is of vital importance that we gather all God's people together for worship. Invite the group to discuss the how all God's children may be engaged in worship. It is easy for this to become a conversation, or even a debate, of the issue of children in worship. Try to keep the conversation focused on engaging all in worship. Invite the group look at 1 Chronicles 29:10–18 again and imagine how it speaks to them in the context of worship and engaging all people in worship.

### Reflect

What have you learned and experienced through focusing on these scriptural models of prayer and liturgy? How will your learning enrich your own life? How will it enrich the life of your congregation?

# Praying and Making Ritual



## Exploration: Discipleship

### About this Setting

A rich tapestry of individual spiritual experiences comprises the whole of the United Church of Christ's many approaches to discipleship through prayer and ritual, both in the past and the present. This allows us to draw upon our multiracial, multicultural and many-faceted heritage to grow in our discipleship through our prayers and ritual practices.

### About this Exploration

The Bible provides models and patterns of praying and making ritual. These help form our experience of prayer, ritual of prayer, and sacred rituals. Mentors in scripture and faith tradition have nurtured others in the art of praying. Paul calls us to prayer as part of life. The invitation to rejoice always; to pray without ceasing; and give thanks in all circumstances informs our daily discipleship. This attitude of prayer embraces the rhythm of life so that prayer becomes as natural as breathing. The practice of prayer and ritual incorporate "being" and "doing" when applied to discipleship.



## BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

**Deuteronomy 26:1–11**  
**1 Thessalonians 5:16–24**

## Leader Preparation

Andy Lang of the United Church Christ's Proclamation, Identity, and Communication team offers a wonderful overview of the ancient Eastern church's practice of the Jesus Prayer (which is different from the Lord's Prayer) at "Jesus Prayer—Praying with the Rhythm of Breath," <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/spiritual-practices/jesus-prayer.html>. Study the information on the link and practice using this method of prayer yourself.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.* (Repeat several times.)

## Session Development

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

- To plan a session of 30–45 minutes, choose three activities using one activity from each category.

## Exploring & Engaging Activities



### 1 Confessing Our Faith

**Leader preparation:** In the United Church of Christ we focus on testimonies, not tests of the faith. Because our roots come from a mix of creedal and non-creedal churches—and because of our official motto, "That they may all be one" (John 17:11)—we do not seek to separate and divide ourselves from one another and others over confessional statements. At the same time, we do not deny the importance of confessing our faith in word and deed.

Read Deuteronomy 26:1–11. Notice that it offers a liturgy of confession featuring words and actions. Be prepared to discuss confessions of faith with your group.

#### Supplies:

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- (optional) "Creeds, Affirmations of Faith," in *The New Century Hymnal*, numbers 881–887

Invite a volunteer to read Deuteronomy 26:1–11 to the group. Point out that it is a confessional liturgy featuring both prescribed words and actions. Compare that with the creeds and affirmations of faith in *The New Century Hymnal*. Together, write a confessional liturgy based on your experiences. Try to make sure that ritual actions are a part of your confessional liturgy. When you are done, share it with others in your congregation and beyond!

### 2 Breath Prayer

**Leader preparation:** Look at the information gathered by Andy Lang of the United Church of Christ's Proclamation, Identity, and Communication team about breath prayers, in the online article "Praying with the Rhythm of Breath." Be prepared to lead the group through a time of breath prayer using the breath prayer found in the activity.

#### Supplies:

- chairs, mats, or cushions upon which participants can sit comfortably
- copy for each person of the article "Praying with the Rhythm of Breath," online at "Jesus Prayer," <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/spiritual-practices/jesus-prayer.html>

Introduce your group to the article "Praying with the Rhythm of Breath." Lead the group through a time of breath prayer using this pattern:

*Breathe in*  
Lord Jesus Christ,  
*Breathe out*  
have mercy on me.

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

Ask the participants if they found this way of praying helpful or not and why. Invite them to share how and when they might use this method again. Give each person a copy of “Praying with the Rhythm of Breath” to take home and try other prayers.

### ③ The Way We Pray

**Leader preparation:** Deuteronomy 26:1–11 appears to focus strongly on bringing memories and practices of the past to the present, while 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24 appears to encourage us to carry the present into the future. Throughout Christian history, faithful disciples have unfortunately entered into conflict with one another over the form of prayers and rituals. A notable period of time in which this took place, in one group that became a part of the United Church of Christ, was during the liturgical movements of the Reformed Church in the middle of the nineteenth century. You can read more about this history online at 19th Century Mercersburg Theology, <http://www.ucc.org/ucnews/apr04/19th-century-mercensburg-theol.html>, if you wish. Generally the questions that are asked when reforms of prayers and rituals are proposed are these: Will our prayers and rituals root us in the past? If so, how far? Or will they summon us toward the future? Will they take familiar forms, seek novel expressions, or attempt to recapture a lost past so strange as to seem novel?

**Supplies:** None

Invite participants to consider times when your congregation experienced conflict over worship. This may have happened over the issue of welcoming children to the table, or changing the order of service, or changing the time of the service, or having a contemporary worship service with a praise band, or including liturgical dance, or any other issues. Engage the group in conversation using the following questions.

- Were these conflicts due to local or more wide-scale changes in worship practices and the wider culture?
- When I pray privately and worship with others, do I feel more rooted in the past, alive in the present, or drawn to the future? Why is this so?

Invite the participants to name one experience or worship practice for which they are thankful and one by which they are challenged, if they are comfortable doing so. Close with prayer thanking God for these worship experiences and the many ways people come together to pray and worship.

## Discerning & Deciding Activities



### ④ Offering Prayers (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Deuteronomy 26:1–11 describes a liturgical rite for offering thanksgiving gifts to God. Most congregations collect gifts and offerings sometime during a regular worship service. Pay attention to how your congregation normally does this. Compare it to the movements and words described in Deuteronomy 26:1–11.

### Supplies:

- Bibles
- (optional) worship bulletins from your congregation

Invite volunteers to read Deuteronomy 26:1–11 to the group. Explain, if necessary, that this passage describes an offering liturgy. Discuss the way your congregation chooses to take up gifts and offerings, using worship bulletins if you choose. Notice parallels and differences between your practices and those of the ancient Israelites. Invite the participants to imagine and share different ways in which this part of the worship service might happen.



### 5 The Reading

**Leader preparation:** Deuteronomy 26:1–11 is designed to help God’s people remember God’s blessings through ritual acts of thanksgiving, reminding them of their beginnings as a people and recalling God’s deliverance from Egyptian bondage. The passage serves as a call to ritual offerings grounded in gratitude.

The cultural groups that have come together in the United Church of Christ and its parent groups include the Congregational Churches, the Christian Churches, the Reformed Church, and the Evangelical Church. Although many of the people of those churches experienced oppression in one form or another during their histories, few groups can lay claim to a history of harsh treatment and affliction as that of African Americans. It is no surprise that African American Christianity is highlighted by its special attraction to the stories of the Hebrew Exodus from Egypt that is recalled in Deuteronomy 26:1–11.

One way that slave owning and non-slave owning whites alike have sought to keep the force of their oppression over black men, women, and children is to deny them the gift of literacy. The American Missionary Association made strong and ongoing attempts to bring education to free African Americans from an early era. Some of the history of these efforts is recalled in the online article “Hidden Histories in the United Church of Christ—Volume I,” <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/hidden-histories/>. Go online to the article “Blacks and the American Missionary Association,” <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/hidden-histories/blacks-and-the-american.html>, and read accounts of some of their activities. Note especially the stories of Mary Smith Peake and Edmonia Highgate.

Take a look at “The Reading” by S. Wilson. It is a painting from an era removed in time from slavery and direct oppression. It captures a spirit of the thirst for knowledge—both intellectual and spiritual—that is in some places still the ongoing legacy of fearless trailblazers such as Mary Smith Peake and Edmonia Highgate, whose Christian faith committed them to fight injustice and ignorance on behalf of God and their fellow human beings despite the dangers involved.

### Supplies:

- “Excerpt from ‘Blacks and the American Missionary Association,’” Attachment: Activity 5
- artwork: “The Reading” by S. Wilson, <http://www.art.com/products/p10278691-sa-i852604/s-wilson-the-reading.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=6acc8b6e6b0347f498d112cbdaf18251&searchstring=the+reading+wilson>
- marker and newsprint or whiteboard



Display “The Reading” by S. Wilson, and invite participants to look at it while you share the information about Mary Smith Peake and Edmonia Highgate and the American Missionary Association’s efforts to educate freed slaves. Invite the group to talk about ways they can fight injustice in your congregation and/or community. Together write a prayer asking God to grant strength and wisdom for members of the group to fight injustice.

### ⑥ Prayer: “God Expects It” or “God Invites It”

**Leader preparation:** The Heidelberg Catechism, <http://www.ucc.org/beliefs/heidelberg-catechism.html>, has nurtured generations of Reformed Christians since its writing in 1563. Similarly, the German immigrant groups who arrived later in the United States designed for themselves the Evangelical Catechism, <http://www.ucc.org/beliefs/heidelberg-catechism.html>, under the influence of their common Reformed and Lutheran roots.

Here are two quotations that begin each respective catechism’s section on prayer. Consider which one more closely resonates with your view and experience of prayer. Why? Do you find both hard to relate to your own experience? How and why?

Because prayer is the most important part  
of the thankfulness God requires of us.  
And also because God gives his grace and Holy Spirit  
only to those who pray continually and groan inwardly,  
asking God for these gifts  
and thanking him for them.

FROM THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

Prayer is the conversation of the heart with God for the purpose of praising him, asking him to supply the needs of ourselves and others, and thanking him for whatever he gives us.

FROM THE EVANGELICAL CATECHISM

Write these two statements on separate sheets of newsprint.

#### **Supplies:**

- prepared newsprint with statements on prayer
- paper
- pens and pencils

Draw the participants’ attention to the two sheets of newsprint with the statements about prayer. Invite volunteers to read each of the statements to the group. Have the group talk about what each statement means. Ask them which most closely resonates with their views and experiences of prayer. Encourage participants to share and allow for divergent opinions. Ask if any find both statements hard to relate to their own experience. Encourage them to explain how and why this may be so. With the understanding that all prayer is good, despite there being different perspectives on prayer and how and why one prays, invite participants to write a prayer based on the perspective that is least dominant for them. Have the group share their prayers as they feel comfortable.

## Sending & Serving Activities



### 7 Litany of Thanksgiving (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Read Deuteronomy 26:1–11. Moses modeled a prayer of thanksgiving for God’s people to use as they brought their first fruits to the priest.

**Supplies:**

- Bibles
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Invite the group to take turns reading aloud Deuteronomy 26:1–11 verse by verse. Invite the group to list things for which they are thankful. Have them turn the list into a litany of thanksgiving by creating a responsive sentence that will be repeated after each thanksgiving. Share together in this litany. Tell the participants to remember God’s grace, be thankful, and go forth to share it with others.

### 8 Embodied Prayer (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Rev. Delle McCormick—a Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ missionary who has served in the Philippines, Mexico, and here in the United States—teaches a method of prayer she learned from a Filipino nun. See the online article “Embodied Prayer by Rev. Delle McCormick.” Take time to learn the method, practicing it yourself, so that you can lead your group.

**Supplies:**

- copy of the article “Embodied Prayer by Rev. Delle McCormick” for each person, found at “Embodied Prayer,” <http://globalministries.org/lac/misionaries/embodied-prayer.html>

Lead the group in learning the method of Embodied Prayer. Discuss your experiences of it. Ask them if they found it helpful or not and why. Ask them how and when they might use this method again. Give each person a copy of the article about the method for use at home. Encourage them to share it with others.

### 9 20 Ways to Add More Prayers to Your Life

**Leader preparation:** Take a look online at “20 Ways to Add More Prayers to Your Life.” As you prepare for this session, try out a few of the ways discussed. Be prepared to share your experiences with the group.

**Supplies:**

- computer with Internet access
- digital computer
- website: “20 Ways to Add More Prayers to Your Life” <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/your-life-better/remembering-prayer/>

Invite the participants to browse the website “20 Ways to Add More Prayers to Your Life.” Share your own experiences of the ones that you tried out already. Invite everyone to pick one or two of these practices to try. Begin your next session with a time of sharing about everyone’s experiences of these practices.

### Reflect

What have you learned about prayer and ritual through the activities of this Exploration? How have the words and actions in which you have participated assisted you in being of and doing faith in more enriched and enriching ways?



## Attachment: Activity 5

**Excerpt from “Blacks and the American Missionary Association”**

Male teachers were beaten and warned to leave or be killed. Some disappeared. Their schools were burned and they rebuilt them with their own hands. They started orphanages for black children and adopted some of the orphans themselves. The first teacher of the freedmen was one hired by the AMA. She was a woman, but not a Yankee schoolmarm. Mary Smith Peake was a free citizen of the state of Virginia. She was born Mary Smith Kelsey in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1823. Her father was a white “Englishman of rank and culture,” and her mother, a free mulatto. Thus, a black woman had the honor of teaching the first day school for the freedmen. Her school in the Brown Cottage was the seed from which Hampton Institute would grow. Mary Peake’s school included more than fifty children during the day and twenty adults at night. She became seriously ill, but would not rest. On Washington’s birthday in 1862 she died of tuberculosis. AMA secretary Simeon Smith Jocelyn called her a saint, and Brown Cottage became a sacred place.

Even when one discounts the Victorian’s love of sentiment, one is awed by the evidence of affection bestowed on Mary Peake after her death. Two ministers wrote accounts of her life for publication. A brigade surgeon wrote a eulogy, and a regimental doctor wrote a poetic tribute. The Rev. Lewis C. Lockwood, AMA superintendent at Fortress Monroe, wrote that Mrs. Peake was missed “more and more” each day and that “she was indeed a queen among her kind.” He had learned that the home and its furnishings that she had lost in the fire at Hampton almost equaled “the best in that aristocratic place.” Yet, she had been content to live in one room above the school, which Lockwood likened to the upper room of the Last Supper. She had erected to herself a “monument more enduring than brass or granite, by impressing her own image upon a group of susceptible pupils,” in whom she would live again. “We never shall see her like again.”

Until the AMA schools raised up their own teachers, about 5 percent of the AMA workers were blacks. They were special folk indeed. They had acquired an education when most colleges were closed to blacks and women. At one point all the AMA teachers in Maryland were black women, an experiment to show how capable black women were. The idea was dropped immediately, however, lest white Southerners use it as evidence that black teachers and white teachers were incompatible. The names of these women do not appear in published histories. One of them was Edmonia Highgate, who, at nineteen, was already the principal of a school in Binghamton, New York. She and her family were members of Plymouth Church in Syracuse. Ms. Highgate had taught at Norfolk, Virginia; Darlington, Maryland; and New Orleans, Louisiana. In New Orleans she publicly attacked the school board for its segregation policies. Her students were fired upon while they were on their way to school, and so was her classroom while in session.

Before going to Louisiana, Ms. Highgate persuaded the AMA to make her their collecting agent, allowing her to send half of her receipts to the school taught by her mother in Mississippi, and the other half to the AMA general fund. In the 1860s it was still an unusual occupation for any woman to travel about New York, New England, and Lower Canada, addressing meetings and raising money. For a woman of color to do it successfully says much about the AMA and Edmonia Highgate. She died while she was still young. The cause of her death remains unknown.

FROM *HIDDEN HISTORIES OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST* ([HTTP://WWW.UCC.ORG/ABOUT-US/HIDDEN-HISTORIES/BLACKS-AND-THE-AMERICAN.HTML](http://www.ucc.org/about-us/hidden-histories/blacks-and-the-american.html))



# Praying and Making Ritual



## Exploration: Christian Tradition

### About this Setting

Our faith lives and practices are informed and influenced by those who have gone before us in the United Church of Christ and earlier groups. As we remember the ways in which our forebears in the faith practiced prayer and established rituals, we can be assured of God's presence in their lives, and in our own.

### About this Exploration

Christians pray and engage in rituals to draw closer to God and participate in God's vision of a world of justice and peace. Christians across time and cultures stand in a tradition in which we receive God's blessings and share that experience with others. Opening the treasury of Christian traditions can help us express our thanksgiving, laments, petitions, and celebrations. Prayer strengthens our relationship with God as we both speak and listen to the Divine. As we recall God's acts of faithfulness in the past, we are encouraged that God is present with us today.

## BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

**Matthew 6:7-15**  
**1 Corinthians 11:17-26**

## Leader Preparation

Read the online article “Reflections” by John Campbell Nelson, <http://globalministries.org/sasia/overseasstaff/reflections.html>. Nelson—a missionary for Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ and a professor with the Evangelical Christian Church of Timor—quotes at length the Confession of Faith of the church in which he serves. This confession reads, in part:

In Baptism we are received as  
members of God’s family.  
Holy Communion confirms that  
we are sisters and brothers in  
Christ,  
Together with those who are poor  
and suffering.

Ask yourself: Who is poor and suffering in my family, my learning group, my church, my community, our nation, the world? Take time to pray for these people. One of them just may be you!

Prayer: *God of grace, provision, and well being, help me to be open to those in need. Amen.*

## Exploring & Engaging Activities



### ① Worship Traditions (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Quoting an earlier set of worship guidelines published by the United Church of Christ, the compilers of the current *Book of Worship* state that one of its goals is to “conserve the best in the tradition of worship” (Cleveland: United Church of Christ, 2006, p. 7). Pay attention to the particular worship traditions of your local congregation, and prepare to discuss them with your group.

#### **Supplies:**

- copies of worship bulletins from your congregation

As you gather, hand out copies of the worship bulletin used in your congregation. With the group walk through the elements of worship step by step. Invite participants to talk about those parts that stir them to feel closer to God and others, as well as those parts that do not engender such feelings. Encourage discussion of these feelings and the worship components that lead to them. Discuss ways your congregation might offer changes to its worship patterns while still enjoying the benefits of its own particular traditions. Together design an “ideal” worship service for your group. Ask congregational leaders if you might use your worship outline in an upcoming service at your church.

### ② One at the Table

**Leader preparation:** The United Church of Christ affirms two sacraments, baptism and communion. Although these sacraments were ordained by Jesus himself during his earthly ministry, Paul recalls to the Corinthians what was passed on to him concerning the sacrament of communion in 1 Corinthians 11:17–26. Online at “We Are One at Baptism and at the Table,” go about halfway down the page and read the story of Rev. Dr. James Fouter, directly under the heading “People Matter.” Reflect upon the questions at the top of this section concerning James Fouter’s and your own experience of communion. Be prepared to share James’s story as it pertains to the sacrament of communion. Also be prepared to talk about your own thoughts as you lead a discussion about the sacrament of communion. Be aware of your own faith community’s particular practices of communion.

#### **Supplies:**

- copy of the section “People Matter” for each person, found online at “We are One at Baptism and at the Table,” <http://www.ucc.org/vitality/what-matters/we-are-one-at-baptism-and-at.html>

Give each person a copy of “People Matter,” a description of Rev. Dr. Fouter’s experiences related to the sacrament of communion. Invite the participants to recall some of their experiences of communion, both as a child and an adult. Ask them how these experiences have made them closer in their relationships and how have them felt divided from others.





## 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.



### ③ Last Meal Food

**Leader preparation:** Remember that a sacrament is defined in the United Church of Christ as “ritual actions in worship which, according to Scripture, were instituted by Jesus. In the sacraments of baptism and communion, we ask the Holy Spirit to use water, bread, and wine to make visible the grace, forgiveness, and presence of God in Christ” (online at “What is a sacrament in the United Church of Christ,” <http://www.ucc.org/worship/communion/>).

Take a look at “The Last Supper Detail” by Crespi. Notice the varieties of food not usually thought of as being part of Jesus’ Last Supper. How could such a meal among friends be sacramental? When has a meal shared with others been sacramental for you?

#### Supplies:

- artwork: “The Last Supper Detail” by Crespi, <http://www.art.com/products/p12061746-sa-i1508087/daniele-crespi-the-last-supper-detail-of-the-food.htm?sorig=cat&sorigid=0&dimvals=0&ui=6acc8b6e6b0347f498d112cbdaf18251&searchstring=the+last+supper+detail+of+food+by+crespi%09>
- food and drink

Display “The Last Supper Detail” by Crespi and invite the group to look at it for a few moments. Ask them if they thought that some of this food would have been on the table at Jesus’ last meal and why they think so. Invite the participants to describe what they might want for their last meal. Explore ways in which any meal can take on the tone of a sacrament. End with a snack or a feast!

## Discerning & Deciding Activities



### ④ Sacramental Theologies (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** The Reformation forebears of the groups that gave birth to the United Church of Christ arrived at various conclusions regarding Christ’s presence in the elements of communion and the practice of the Lord’s Supper. Martin Luther (1483–1546) moved only a bit away from the Roman Catholic insistence that Christ is physically present in the elements of communion (transubstantiation). His view, called consubstantiation, drew the distinction that Christ is only spiritually (not physically) present in the bread and wine of communion. Luther’s views continue to have influence on those whose church bears his name. They also had an influence on the sacramental theology of the Evangelical Synod at the time of its organization on the American frontier in the nineteenth century.

In sharp contrast to Luther’s views stand those of Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), the eldest among those who shaped the Reformed traditions. Pastoring in the Swiss city of Zurich, Zwingli taught that the Lord’s Supper is a memorial meal at which Jesus’ mighty acts are remembered, but at which he is neither spiritually nor physically present. Needless to say, this view did not necessitate the frequent celebration of the sacrament of communion in Zurich, where it was marked but four times a year. Zwingli’s view on communion has had a continual influence upon certain strains of the Reformed tradition. This influence is especially pronounced in the history of the Presbyterian and Baptist groups that formed part



of the early Christian connection, which later came to be called the Christian Church. But Zwingli's view on communion was also influential among the Separatist Puritans we commonly call the Pilgrims. Later, on the frontiers of America, it would even begin to influence German Reformed and Evangelical Synod views of the Lord's Supper.

John Calvin (1509–1564), the youngest of the first generation of Reformers, became the leader of the church in Geneva, Switzerland. Through his on-and-off-again relationship with the civil authorities in Geneva, he wielded a remarkable influence upon Reformed theology, on the European continent, in the British Isles, and later in America. Calvin's views on the presence of Christ in the practice of the Lord's Supper were subtle and nuanced. His views might be summed up by saying that he believed that Jesus was present in the sacrament as much in its celebration among God's people as in the elements themselves. Calvin's sacramental theology exerted influence among non-Separatist Puritans, early generations of the German Reformed, and the Methodists who became part of the Christian Connection. Later on his theology would continue to influence German Reformed thought through the Mercersburg movement led by seminary professors John W. Nevin and Philip Schaff in the nineteenth century. This material is condensed in the attachment "Sacramental Theologies."

Reflect on what you have been taught about Jesus' presence with us in communion. Did you buy into this teaching? Why or why not? If not, what do you believe concerning Christ's presence in the celebration of the Lord's Supper?

### **Supplies:**

- "Sacramental Theologies," Attachment: Activity 4

Give each person a copy of the table on the attachment, and review the details of the brief review of sacramental theology. You may want to add some information from the more detailed discussion in the Leader's preparation section above. Then have participants divide into groups based on their views. Invite them to prepare a defense of their sacramental views. Have each group present their defense to the others. Ask them if anyone was convinced by another group's presentation. End with the following prayer, or one like it: *Thank you God that, despite our differences, we remain one in you through your Son, Jesus. Amen.*

## **5 Martin Luther on the Lord's Prayer**

**Leader preparation:** Martin Luther (1483–1546) is unarguably the most important of the first generation of church Reformers who helped to give rise to Protestant forms of Christianity. His importance was carried over to the United Church of Christ not only because of his early role in seeking to make the church and its faith more applicable to the common people of his and later eras but also because of the influence of his teachings upon those of our UCC forebears who became part of the Evangelical Church.

Go to the UCC's website to find the article "Martin Luther's Small Catechism: a 'short course' in the Christian faith." Page down to the section on the Lord's Prayer. Study Luther's thoughts and compare them to your own thinking about the various petitions of the Lord's Prayer.

### Supplies:

- copy for each person of Martin Luther's thoughts on the Lord's Prayer, found at "Martin Luther's Small Catechism: commentary on the Lord's Prayer," <http://www.ucc.org/beliefs/martin-luthers-small.html#LORD>
- sheets of newsprint
- markers

Distribute copies of Martin Luther's thoughts on the Lord's Prayer from the UCC website, and invite the participants to review the material. Divide into groups and have each group look at a different section, or sections, of the prayer and consider Luther's thoughts on it. Give each group a sheet of newsprint and marker and time discuss its assigned part(s). Ask each group to write on the newsprint a sentence or two, either a prayer or a comment, that summarizes their discussion, thoughts, beliefs, insights, or questions about their assigned phrase. Bring the group back together and invite the small groups to share their insights. Place the newsprint from each group in order of the Lord's Prayer, and use the sentences created by the groups as your closing prayer.

## ⑥ Crossing Boundaries

**Leader preparation:** Read Paul's challenge to the Christians of Corinth from 1 Corinthians 11:17–26. Use a good study Bible to help you interpret the cultural setting. It would appear that the Corinthians were having a difficult time with social and cultural boundaries, boundaries that Paul challenges them to cross in the name of Christ.

Ken and Betty Frank serve the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)/United Church of Christ Global Ministries in Istanbul, Turkey. Read their online account of a visit of German pastors from the Evangelical Church of Westphalia to Istanbul, entitled "The Westphalians." Think about the boundaries crossed by these pastors, by their Turkish hosts, and by Turkish immigrants in Germany.

### Supplies:

- copy for each person of the article "The Westphalians," <http://www.globalministries.org/mee/missionaries/the-westphalians.html>
- sheets of newsprint
- markers

Give each person a copy of "The Westphalians." Invite the group to read it to themselves, or have volunteers take turns reading a paragraph at a time aloud to the group. Ask participants to identify where and when boundaries were crossed in this story. Encourage them to discuss their own experiences of cultural and social boundary crossing. Invite the group to get into pairs and work together to write a prayer related to the crossing of social and cultural boundaries. As a whole group, combine and edit the prayers together to form a longer litany.

## Sending & Serving Activities



### 7 Brothers and Sisters to Those in Need (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Look at the selection from the Confession of Faith of the Evangelical Christian Church of Timor used in the Leader Preparation section at the start of this Exploration.

**Supplies:**

- (optional) markers and newsprint or whiteboard

Read to the group the selection from the Confession of Faith of the Evangelical Christian Church of Timor. Invite participants to consider who in their families, their learning group, their church, their community, this nation, and the world are poor and suffering. You might make a list on newsprint or a whiteboard. Take time to pray for these people together. Spend a few moments discussing ways those gathered can be better brothers and sisters to those who are suffering and in need.

### 8 Brief Communion Prayers

**Leader preparation:** The United Church of Christ online resource entitled “Brief Communion Prayers” suggests the following about the things we say and do as we engage in the sacrament of communion:

No matter how brief a liturgy may be, its intent and effect should be to celebrate Christ’s presence recognized through bread and wine, blessing and fellowship.

Historically, from this kernel of table, meal, and blessing grew elaborate rituals and intricate prayers used throughout our history in our many traditions. Elaboration may add richness or may obscure central things. Brevity can allow a community to focus on bread and wine and gesture—a sensory experience of the goodness of God sometimes overwhelmed by words.

Consider ways words have helped or hindered your experience of communion. Invite a communion celebrant, if necessary. Be aware of any sensitivities, such as gluten intolerance, as you provide communion elements.

**Supplies:**

- communion elements and service implements, such as chalice and paten or communion trays
- copy for each person of the webpage “Brief Communion Prayers,” <http://www.ucc.org/assets/pdfs/hc4.pdf>
- communion celebrant, as needed

Give each person a copy of “Brief Communion Prayers.” Welcome the person who will be leading your group in the communion liturgy, if you needed a celebrant. Invite the group to celebrate communion using the liturgy found in the handout. After you finish celebrating the sacrament, discuss the ways in which the words of the liturgy helped or hindered the experience of communion.

### 9 Free-form Communion Prayer

**Leader preparation:** Read the page at UCC’s website entitled “Hispanic Free-form Communion Prayer.” Many UCC congregations of all racial backgrounds and liturgical traditions are now using such free-form communion prayers more often. Invite a communion celebrant, if necessary. Be aware of any sensitivities, such as gluten intolerance, as you provide communion elements.

#### Supplies:

- Bible
- copy for each person of the webpage “Hispanic Free-form Communion Prayer,” <http://www.ucc.org/assets/pdfs/hc3.pdf>
- markers and newsprint or whiteboard
- communion elements and service implements, such as chalice and paten or communion trays
- communion celebrant, as needed

Distribute copies of “Hispanic Free-form Communion Prayer,” and invite the participants to read about free-form communion. Invite the group to participate in a free-form communion and create a communion liturgy on the spot. Welcome the person who will be leading your group in the communion liturgy, if you needed a celebrant, and invite this person to join in the planning. Explain that they will need the following components of a communion liturgy.

- a communion prayer, which occurs before the Words of Institution
- the Words of Institution, which are found in 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 and are to be spoken by the ordained or licensed celebrant
- a Prayer of Thanksgiving, which occurs after the elements have been shared.

Invite members of the group who do not wish to have a “speaking role” to distribute the elements. When you are finished celebrating communion, invite the group to reflect on this experience, and give thanks!

### Reflect

When do we find strength in unity?  
When do we follow our temptations to divide over issues great and small, especially as they pertain to ritual activities? Why is this so? How can we seek God’s Reign more fully by seeking to remain in full relationship with one another?



## Attachment: Activity 4

Sacramental Theologies				
Sacramental Theology	Transubstantiation	Consubstantiation	Calvinist	Zwinglian
Originator(s)	Post-Apostolic church leaders	Martin Luther, Philipp Melancthon	John Calvin, Martin Bucer	Ulrich Zwingli
Proponents	Roman Catholic Church	Lutheran Churches, Early leaders of the Evangelical Synod (a forebear of the UCC)	Some churches of the Reformed family of faith (Presbyterian, UCC); some Wesleyans (Methodists, Nazarenes, Holiness churches); some "Restorationists" (Disciples of Christ, Churches of Christ)	Some churches of the Reformed family of faith, some Wesleyans, some "Restorationists," All Anabaptists (Mennonite, Amish, Brethren), most Baptists and nearly all other evangelical churches
View of Jesus' Presence or Absence in the Elements of Communion	Bread and wine literally become the flesh and blood of Jesus.	Bread and wine spiritually become the flesh and blood of Jesus.	Jesus is present in the celebration of the sacrament.	Jesus completely absent to the sacramental gathering, which is only a memorial of Christ's sacrificial offering upon the cross.



# Praying and Making Ritual



## Exploration: Context and Mission

### About this Setting

The United Church of Christ and its parent groups have long sought ways in which prayers and rituals of worship can impact its members and others to make a difference in the world. Our commitment to be a multiracial, multicultural, peace-with-justice, open-and-affirming, community accessible to all continues to drive us toward making our life of prayer and ritual have an effect upon ourselves, our relationships to God, and our ways of relating to one another.

### About this Exploration

Ritual helps us understand ourselves and our relationships—within our immediate and extended families, communities of faith, and the world. Joel reminds us that in a hurting and troubled world God calls us together in community, and God's Spirit is poured out amongst all people. The Holy Spirit aids us as we practice prayer and ritual. Engaging in prayer and ritual directs our focus away from ourselves and toward our communities and God. When we embrace prayer and ritual in this context, we are empowered to "have life and have it more abundantly."

## BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:

**Joel 2:1-2, 12-17**  
**Philippians 1:3-4**

## Leader Preparation

Echoing Paul, who writes in one of the Bible Focus Passages listed above, “I thank my God every time I remember you constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you” (Philippians. 1:3–4), take a moment to pray a prayer of thanks to God for each of your fellow learners. Add particular petitions on behalf of each as you feel led to do so.

*Prayer: Gracious God, as I prepare to lead this group, I bring each person before you. You know each of them and their needs. I am so grateful for the opportunity to be in a learning situation with [name each person in the group]. What a joy it is to explore our faith together, God.*

## Session Development

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

## Exploring & Engaging Activities



### 1 O Savior, Let Me Walk with You

**Leader preparation:** Washington Gladden (1836–1918) was a Congregationalist minister and one of the early leaders of the Social Gospel movement that sought to bring together Christian commitment and economic social action. He wrote many hymns. One of his most famous is “O Savior, Let Me Walk with You” (503 in the *New Century Hymnal*). Originally titled “O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee” (tune: Maryton), the hymn, in its simple and direct way, beseeches God to allow faith and action to be joined in the life of those who sing it. Invite an accompanist.

#### Supplies:

- copies of the *New Century Hymnal* or another hymnal with “O Savior [Master], Let Me Walk with You [Thee]” (tune: Maryton) or online at “O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee” lyrics and music, <http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/o/o491.html>
- accompanist and piano or computer with internet access and digital projector

Invite the participants to sing “O Savior [Master], Let Me Walk with You [Thee].” Invite the group to reflect quietly for a few moments. Then talk about where God may be leading you as individuals, as a group, as a church.

### 2 Litany of the Four Directions

**Leader preparation:** Look at the online UCC article “The Litany of the Four Directions,” and familiarize yourself with the litany. If you have time, explore some of the tribal customs of the indigenous peoples from your area so that you can introduce your fellow learners to just a bit of those groups’ history or culture before you take part in the litany together. If you are blessed to be near a Native American congregation, contact its leaders and ask if they might teach your group about their traditions and/or lead you in this or another set of prayers.

#### Supplies:

- drum(s) (Native American if possible)
- copy for each person of the online article “The Litany of the Four Directions,” <http://www.ucc.org/assets/pdfs/ww63-10.pdf>

Distribute copies of “The Litany of the Four Directions,” and invite the group to take part in the litany. Ask for volunteers to beat the drums, or, if Native American leaders can be present, invite them to lead and beat the drum(s).



- 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.



### 3 Dr. Albert Shelton

**Leader preparation:** Dr. Albert Shelton (1874–1922) was a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) medical missionary who was among the first Americans to go to Tibet. Although, like many foreign missionaries of his era, he was initially motivated by what we might now see as less than respectful feelings toward Tibetans and their Buddhist heritage, he came to admire both the Tibetans and their traditions. Those on whose behalf he worked also came to respect him. Unfortunately, Dr. Shelton was killed by bandits in 1922. You can find more details about Dr. Shelton, his ministry and transformation in the book *Pioneer in Tibet: The Life and Perils of Dr. Albert Shelton* by Douglas Wissing, [http://www.amazon.com/Pioneer-Tibet-Perils-Albert-Shelton/dp/1403963282/ref=sr\\_1\\_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1288011446&sr=1-3](http://www.amazon.com/Pioneer-Tibet-Perils-Albert-Shelton/dp/1403963282/ref=sr_1_3?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1288011446&sr=1-3), or you can read an online review of the book at “Book Review,” <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/FK20Ad01.html>.

Study the artwork “Tibetan Yellow Monks Using Prayer Wheels” by Landor.

Go to the website “Digital Prayer Wheels” and learn about the practice of prayer wheels. Tibetan Buddhists believe that saying a prayer, or mantra, releases one’s prayers into the universe and invites the blessings of compassion. You can also download digital prayer wheels at that website.

#### Supplies:

- computer with Internet access
- digital projector
- website: “Digital Prayer Wheels,” <http://www.dharma-haven.org/tibetan/digital-wheels.htm>
- information about Dr. Albert Shelton
- artwork: “Tibetan Yellow Monks Using Prayer Wheels” by Landor, <http://www.art.com/products/p12370511-sa-i1740258/henry-savage-landor-tibetan-yellow-monks-using-prayer-wheels.htm?sorig=0>
- (optional) toy pinwheels for each person

Invite the participants to describe ways that they typically pray considering the following questions.

- Do you stand or sit or have another posture?
- What do you do with your hands?
- What do you pray about?

Share information about Dr. Shelton, focusing especially on the transformation of his attitudes toward Tibetans and their Buddhist traditions. Tell participants that Dr. Shelton, being a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) missionary, was sponsored in his work by a precursor to the current Common Global Ministries Board (CGMB) of the Church of Christ (Disciples of Christ and the United Church of Christ).

Invite participants to look “Tibetan Yellow Monks Using Prayer Wheels” by Landor. Call attention the prayer wheels. Using materials you found at the website “Digital Prayer Wheels,” explain the practice of Tibetan prayer wheels to participants. Explore this site with the participants and try the digital prayer wheels.

Together, write a prayer based in the Christian tradition that might be used as a prayer, or mantra, for you and other group members. Invite the participants to try



out the practice of prayer wheels using the digital prayer wheel or a toy pinwheel. Share the link to “Digital Prayer Wheels” with participants so that they can explore this practice more on their own.

### Discerning & Deciding Activities

#### 4 Confessions, Assurances, and Thanksgivings (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** The prophet Joel appears to be calling the people to repentance in Joel 2:1–2, 12–17. The *Book of Worship of the United Church of Christ* has many resources for communal confession, assurance, and thanksgiving that can be used for God’s people in the United Church of Christ to confess their sins, receive assurance of God’s grace-filled pardon, and be thankful. It is a resource designed “to express the diversity of the United Church of Christ while at the same time lifting up the common liturgical threads which flow through the church, linking the tapestry of the past and weaving the fabric of the future” (*Book of Worship of the United Church of Christ*, p. xi). Try to obtain copies of *Book of Worship of the United Church of Christ*. If you cannot borrow one, you can purchase it in loose-leaf, pocket-sized version or access it online at “Book of Worship of the United Church of Christ,” [https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1408379401?FOLDER=1700&store\\_id=1401](https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1408379401?FOLDER=1700&store_id=1401)

#### **Supplies:**

- Bibles
- copies of *Book of Worship of the United Church of Christ*  
[https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1408379401?FOLDER=1700&store\\_id=1401](https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1408379401?FOLDER=1700&store_id=1401)
- paper
- pens and pencils

Invite volunteers to read Joel 2:1–2, 12–17 to the group. Point out that it appears that the prophet is calling the people to repentance. Tell the participants that confession has often served as an act of repentance in the church, but that it is usually followed by an assurance of God’s pardon and sometimes a prayer of thanksgiving. Using the *Book of Worship of the United Church of Christ* (pp. 530–36), invite the participants to explore the resources of confession and assurance available there. Have the group divide into smaller groups of two or three people, and invite them to write their own prayers of confession and pardon. Have the small groups share their prayers with the larger group. Consult worship leaders in your congregation to see if they may be used in one of your church’s worship services.

### 5 Covenant and Mission

**Leader preparation:** The idea of “covenant” has been important to God’s people throughout salvation history. In the United Church of Christ, we have inherited this concept especially strongly from our Reformed roots. Both the prophet Joel and the Apostle Paul address God’s covenant faithfulness in the scriptures for this Exploration.

In 2006, Rev. Dawn Barnes and Rev. Jon Barnes—serving with the Kei Regional Council of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa, South Africa on Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ—reflected upon the interrelationship between covenant and mission in this way:

But being in covenant, in relationship, is not just something that God does or offers to us. God gives us a job, a responsibility . . . a mission! We can be in covenant with God and say, “We believe . . . yes, we believe in God!” but without action, without works, without mission we are not truly in covenant with God. We are called as Christians to share the gospel to the ends of the earth, to show our faith by our works, to bring life more abundantly, to bring justice and to love the Lord our God with all of our hearts, minds, and strength. We cannot be in covenant with God if we are not active in mission.

FROM THE ONLINE ARTICLE “COVENANT AND MISSION”

#### **Supplies:**

- copy for each person of the online article “Covenant and Mission,” <http://www.globalministries.org/africa/missionaries/covenant-and-mission.html>
- journal, small notebook, or paper for each person
- pens and pencils

Give each person a copy of “Covenant and Mission,” and invite the group study the quote from Rev. Dawn Barnes and Rev. Jon Barnes. Ask the participants to share their feelings about the Barnes’ understanding of mission and context. Invite the participants to write in their journals about a personal covenant of mission, and then have them share as they feel comfortable. If possible, strategize ways in which learners’ personal mission covenants might have a wider impact through your group or others in your setting.

### 6 A Calendar of Prayer for the United Church of Christ

**Leader preparation:** Go online to “A Calendar of Prayer for the United Church of Christ” and explore the stories from across the United States and from around the world that illustrate the depth and breadth of the mission outreach of the United Church of Christ. From the drop down menu, choose any day close to the day you will be meeting with your group, and make copies to share with the group. You can even e-mail or text a link to participants, if you choose.

**Supplies:**

- copy for each person of the day you choose from “A Calendar of Prayer for the United Church of Christ,” <http://www.ucc.org/worship/calendar/>

Give each person a copy of the day you chose from “A Calendar of Prayer for the United Church of Christ.” Invite the group to read and discuss the story. Pray the suggested prayer together.

## Sending & Serving Activities



### 7 The Extravagant Welcome of Intercessory Prayer (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Paul prayed intercessory prayers on behalf of his friends in Philippi. This statement can be found on the United Church of Christ Vitality website “We Are a People of Extravagant Welcome: Prayer Matters”:

What do you pray about? For whom do you pray? Prayer, itself, is a form of “extravagant welcome.” Most often when we pray, it is family, friends, and those we know who come to mind. However, prayer of the extravagant welcome, of true intercessory prayer, opens us to all God’s children and the world around us.

As you prepare for this activity, be open to the extravagant welcome of God’s grace calling you to “intercessory prayer.”

**Supplies:**

- Bibles
- copy for each person of “We Are a People of Extravagant Welcome: Prayer Matters” <http://www.ucc.org/vitality/what-matters/we-are-people-of-extravagant.html>

Read Philippians 1:3–4. Give each person a copy of “We Are a People of Extravagant Welcome: Prayer Matters.” Invite the group to sit together silently in God’s presence for a few moments. Invite the participants to pray aloud for the people or concerns that come to mind after you say an opening prayer. Tell them that their prayers can be as simple as a name, or they may include more details. Close the time in prayer together lifting all you have prayed for to God’s care and blessing.



### 8 No Traveller's Borne

**Leader preparation:** Study “No Traveller’s Borne” by Jess and notice the dark and dynamic work in light of the words of the prophet Joel found in Joel 2:1–2, 12–17.

#### Supplies:

- Bible
- artwork: “No Traveller’s Borne” by Jess, [https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/261288992?VIEW\\_PRODUCT=true&product\\_id=15627&store\\_id=1401](https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/261288992?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=15627&store_id=1401)
- stationery note cards and envelopes

Display “No Traveller’s Borne” and invite the participants to look at it as you read Joel 2:1–2, 12–17 to the group. Share the following information about the painter. Known only as Jess for the last half-century of his life, he was a creative force in the San Francisco art scene of the middle and late 20th century. Born Burgess Franklin Collins in Long Beach, California, he was drafted into the military during World War II, and he assisted in the work of the Manhattan Project that produced the first atomic bombs. After nightmares that caused him to reflect on the destruction of the earth by humankind, he enrolled in art school in San Francisco. He was estranged from his family when he came out as a gay man. He was the long-time partner of poet Robert Duncan, whom he met in 1951. Mr. Duncan died in 1988. Jess continued to paint and make collages well into the 1990s.

Invite the participants to reflect on ways in which the broken relationships implied in the Joel 2:1–2, 12–17 and those seen in the ominous swirl of the artwork might have common ground in our common inhumanity to other human beings. Give group members a moment to think of someone with whom they have grown distant or estranged. Challenge them to write a heartfelt note to this person or group of people seeking forgiveness and/or reconciliation. Tell them it will be up to them whether they send it. End with this prayer: *God of all people, forgive us our inhumanity to others. Heal us where we have experienced pain from others. And help us seek to live in unity with all people, regardless of race, class, cultural differences, sexual and gender identities, or any other thing that we allow to keep us apart. Amen.*

### 9 Justice for the Inhabitants of the Marshall Islands

**Leader preparation:** From an early era the Congregational Churches through the American Missionary Association sent missionaries to the Marshall Islands (<http://www.rmiembassyus.org/>). Today over fifty percent of Marshall Islanders are members of the United Church of Christ of the Marshall Islands. Despite the concern shown to the citizens of the twenty-nine atolls and five islands that make up the Republic of the Marshall Islands by our Congregational forebears, the government of our nation and its military-industrial complex have been guilty of sorely using the people and environment of this small nation for well over fifty years. You can find out more about how the Republic of the Marshall Islands became a U.S. nuclear testing ground online at both Republic of the Marshall Islands Embassy to the United States, <http://www.rmiembassyus.org/Nuclear%20Issues.htm>, and United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries, <http://www.ucc.org/justice/marshall-islands/>.

Through the prophet Joel, God challenged the people to return with all their hearts, “with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning” (Joel 2:12), instructing



them to rend their hearts instead of engaging in the ritual action of tearing their clothing. As we seek to reach out to the world with the Good News of God's justice and peace, there comes a time when we, too, must put aside our rituals and act for the sake of ourselves and others. Such action has been a mark of the United Church of Christ.

### Supplies:

- computer with Internet access
- digital projector

Share information about the Congregational and United Church of Christ legacy in the Marshall Islands and the shameful legacy of U.S. nuclear testing in the islands and on their people from the Leader Preparation above. Go to Republic of the Marshall Islands Embassy to the United States and United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries and explore these websites with the participants to find out further information.

Tell the group that through the prophet Joel, God challenged the people to return with all their hearts, "with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning" (Joel 2:12), instructing them to rend their hearts instead of engaging in the ritual action of tearing their clothing. Explain that social action that understands when to lay aside prayers and rituals for the sake of justice has been a mark of the United Church of Christ. Together draft an e-mail to your U.S. Representative and Senator, <http://www.contactingthecongress.org/>, and White House, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/>, concerning the plight of the Marshall Islands and their people due to U.S. nuclear testing. Consider this demand for justice your prayer.

## Reflect

How have the activities in this Exploration helped you and those in your group "have life and have it more abundantly"? How have they encouraged you to share this abundance with others?



# Praying and Making Ritual



## Exploration: Future and Vision

### About this Setting

“Never place a period where God has placed a comma.” This quotation from the 20th century comedian Gracie Allen has become a slogan of the United Church of Christ. It sums up what we seek to be and to do in the present as we open ourselves to the possibilities revealed to us by God for the future in our life of prayer and ritual. God is not done leading us into the future yet, so we practice remaining open to hearing our Still-Speaking God as we are guided in our practices of prayer and ritual.

### About this Exploration

The practices of our faith are happening within us and around us. Through awareness and attentiveness, we may be beckoned toward a new vision for the future in our relationships with both the divine and with one another. An openness to and discovery of the things going on around us will focus us upon the spiritual conversations already taking place. By exploring prayer and ritual in the present we can find new ways to build a vision for a future grounded in God’s love and faithfulness.

**BIBLE FOCUS PASSAGES:**  
**2 Samuel 7:18–29**  
**Philemon 1:1–9**

## Leader Preparation

A large part of our Christian Scriptures was written by the Apostle Paul in the form of letters. Philemon is certainly the most personal of his letters that the church has chosen to preserve. Take a moment to read Philemon 1:1–9, and then write a short and supportive note to a friend. End with the following prayer, or one like it.

*Prayer: God, thank you for [friend's name]. Bless his/her life, loved ones, and activities each and every day. 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 Kansas City Statement of Faith (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** The most important theological statement of 20th century Congregationalism was adopted by the National Council of Congregation Churches at Kansas City, Missouri, in October of 1913. As the gathered delegates reflected on Congregationalism’s almost three-century history in America, they sought to look forward to God’s future guidance for them and their congregations. Below is an excerpt from “The Kansas City Statement of Faith” that speaks of this concern. Kindly ignoring the outdated use of gender-specific language, write this clause on a sheet of newsprint or a whiteboard. Invite an accompanist to join your group, or recruit a group member to serve as accompanist for this activity.

Depending, as did our fathers, upon the continued guidance  
of the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth,  
we work and pray for the transformation of the world  
into the Kingdom of God,  
and we look with faith for the triumph of righteousness,  
and the life everlasting.

#### Supplies:

- prepared newsprint or whiteboard with the excerpt above, which can be found online at “The Kansas City Statement of Faith,” <http://www.ucc.org/beliefs/kansas-city-statement-of.html>
- hymnals
- accompanist and keyboard

Invite the participants to imagine what the “transformation of the world” and the “triumph of righteousness” might have looked like for the delegates to the delegates of the National Council of Congregational Churches who met in Kansas City in 1913. Then invite them to imagine and discuss what the “transformation of the world” and the “triumph of righteousness” would look in our time in both your setting and in the wider world. Invite them to share their hopes and dreams, their fears and anxieties. Hand out hymnals and invite participants to choose a hymn of hope for the future. They may want to browse the hymns or topical listing of hymns, or you could make a suggestion from the following selections:

- “O for a World” (tune: Azmon)
- “Song of Hope” (“Canto de Esperanza”) (tune: Argentina)
- “My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less” (tune: Solid Rock)
- “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past” (tune: St. Anne)

End with this prayer: *God we entrust to you all our hopes and fears. Allow us to be instruments of transformation for your sake and the glory of your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.*



## ② Worshiping into God's Future

**Leader preparation:** Look at this page from the UCC website: “We Thank God by Working for a Just and Loving World.” Scroll down to “Worship Matters,” and read that section. Print and copy the “Worship Matters” section, making a copy for each participant. If you would like to show the PowerPoint presentation “Worshiping into God’s Future,” download it and save it to your computer.

### Supplies:

- copy of “Worship Matters” for each person, <http://www.ucc.org/vitality/what-matters/we-thank-god-by-working-for-a.html>
- (optional) computer
- (optional) digital projector
- (optional) PowerPoint presentation and script “Worshiping into God’s Future,” <http://www.ucc.org/worship/worshiping-into-gods-future/>
- “Unison Prayer of Confession,” Attachment: Activity 2

Give each person a copy of “Worship Matters,” and invite volunteers to read the first two paragraphs to the group. If you wish, show the PowerPoint presentation “Worshiping into God’s Future.” Invite the group to engage in conversation as they consider the questions in the last paragraph of “Worship Matters.” As you conclude, give each person a copy of the attachment, and invite them to pray the prayer together.



## ③ “There’s still more light and truth breaking through . . .”

**Leader preparation:** As the Pilgrims departed Leyden, Holland, for North America, their long-time pastor, John Robinson (who remained with the rest of the group in Europe), prayed a prayer that included the passage on the attachment.

Read the attachment, and note that those words have given birth to the slogan “There’s still more light and truth breaking through.” That has been paired with Gracie Allen’s statement, “Never place a period where God has placed a comma,” to form the backbone of the United Church of Christ’s God Is Still Speaking campaign, <http://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking/>. Just as God was speaking through Paul to Philemon, so God speaks to us today.

### Supplies:

- Bibles
- “Excerpt from Rev. John Robinson’s Prayer,” Attachment: Activity 3
- (optional) computer with Internet access
- (optional) digital projector

Invite a volunteer to read Philemon 1:1–9 to the group. Ask the group what they think Philemon is being called to do. Give each person a copy of the attachment, and share some of the background of its occasion. Invite participants to draw the connection between this prayer, Gracie Allen’s statement, and the God Is Still Speaking campaign. If people are unfamiliar with the campaign and all of its parts, you may want to spend time exploring the God Is Still Speaking website. Pray together that God will speak to you in ways that will make the message clear to others.



## Discerning & Deciding Activities



### 4 Discernment (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** Discernment, though not a process used solely by members of the United Church of Christ, is nonetheless an activity very familiar to the people of this denomination. Plugging “discernment” into the Google search engine at ucc.org turns up no less than 214 hits! In our congregation, associations, conferences, and other constituencies, we are (or ought to be) always seeking God’s will through processes of discernment. In Philemon 1:6 Paul writes: “I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that you may do for Christ.” Think about what good your congregation or other faith community can do for Christ. What would this look like? What might the outcomes be?

**Supplies:**

- Bible

Read Philemon 1:6 to the group. Remind them that it was written by Paul to a particular group on a particular occasion but that it still applies to us who live many years in the future from Paul’s time. Using the verse as a stepping off point, ask the following questions.

- What good can we do for Christ in this group? As a congregation?
- What would this good look like?
- What might the outcomes of such actions be?

Have a discussion based upon what group members have discerned. End with the following prayer: *God guide us in the way you would have us share your goodness with those around us.*



### 5 “Human Vainglory” or Covenant Faithfulness?

**Leader preparation:** The German Evangelical Christians who formed the Evangelical Synod and Church (which later became a part of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and finally the United Church of Christ) maintained close ties to their homeland. Reinhold Niebuhr, the son of an Evangelical Synod pastor who himself was ordained, became one the most important American theologians of the twentieth century. In this capacity he taught for many years at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. While there he met Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), one of the most brilliant theological minds of his or any generation. Bonhoeffer spent 1930–31 at Union. Later, after Hitler seized power in Germany, Bonhoeffer returned home, despite advice to the contrary from his American and British friends. There he became a guiding light of the Confessing Church, the remnant of the German Evangelical Church that chose to stand up against Hitler and his Third Reich. For this Bonhoeffer lost his life in April 1945.

In the Barmen Declaration, their major statement of faith, The Confessing Church claimed in part:

We reject the false doctrine that with human vainglory the Church could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of self-chosen desires, purposes and plans.

BARMEN DECLARATION [HTTP://WWW.UCC.ORG/BELIEFS/BARMEN-DECLARATION.HTML](http://www.ucc.org/beliefs/barmen-declaration.html)

One might read David's prayer in 2 Samuel 7:18–29 as such a bit of “vainglory” were it not for our shared conviction that he was the covenanted chosen of God, a human and spiritual ancestor of Jesus Christ. Still, there are times when human leaders can and do partake of the sort of “vainglory” that makes them believe that everything that they say or do is blessed by God or some other divine, providential force. Few reach the depths of depravity that Hitler and the Third Reich did. And yet, there is always that danger where human power and potential are concerned.

### **Supplies:**

- Bibles
- “Barmen Declaration,” Attachment: Activity 5
- markers

Invite volunteers to take turns reading 2 Samuel 7:18–29 to the group. Ask the group if this passage could sound a little “vainglorious.” Share some background on Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church. Give each person a copy of the attachment, and give them a few minutes to read through the document. Then invite them to focus on the last statement of rejection of false doctrine. Discuss the dangerous “vainglory” of Hitler and others who place their will above God's. Point out that few movements or leaders reach the depths of depravity that Hitler and the Third Reich did, and then ask participants if they have seen any leaders or groups who do cross the line over into “vainglory” in the church and/or in the wider world. Together, discuss what might be done to stop such movements and leaders if they should arise in the future.

Divide into groups of two or three people. Ask each group to choose something in the current culture, the church, or its own particular faith community to reject, as well as something else in which to believe or find hope. Allow time for the groups to share their choices.

## **⑥ “Here in This Place”**

**Leader preparation:** As the people of the United Church of Christ seek to engage the future with prayers and liturgies that will engage progressive Christians now and for decades to come, they have been offered the gift of the online “Sing! Prayer and Praise.” This contemporary worship resource was compiled with the help and guidance of the United Church of Christ's covenanted Local Church Ministries team.

Among the writers whose songs are featured in this resource is Christopher Grundy, <http://www.christophergrundy.com/>, singer-songwriter and professor of worship and homiletics at Eden Seminary. One of the ten songs written by Christopher in this collection is “Here in This Place.” Invite a guitar accompanist. On a sheet of newsprint or a whiteboard, write the words to 1 Samuel 7:24, substituting your congregation's name for “Israel.”

Check out the lyrics of “Here in This Place” and compare them to the tone of David’s prayer in 2 Samuel 7:18–29. Note verse 24 when David says: “And you established your people Israel for yourself to be your people forever; and you, O Lord, became their God.”

### Supplies:

- Bibles
- copies of the online resource “Sing! Prayer and Praise,” [https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1777393562?VIEW\\_PRODUCT=true&product\\_id=19401&store\\_id=1401](https://secure3.convio.net/ucc/site/Ecommerce/1777393562?VIEW_PRODUCT=true&product_id=19401&store_id=1401)
- guitar accompanist
- prepared newsprint or whiteboard with 1 Samuel 7:24

Invite the group to sing “Here in this Place.” Invite a volunteer to read 1 Samuel 7:18–29 to the group. Draw attention to the newsprint or whiteboard on which you have written 1 Samuel 7:24, and invite the group to say it together as a prayer. Ask the group to look at the lyrics of the song and compare them to the tone of David’s prayer in 1 Samuel 7:18–29. Invite them to consider how God has made your congregation God’s people and where God is guiding your congregation.

## Sending & Serving Activities



### 7 Just a Note to Show I Care (Easy Preparation)

**Leader preparation:** A large part of our Christian Scriptures was written by the Apostle Paul in the form of letters. Philemon is certainly the most personal of his letters that the church has chosen to preserve.

### Supplies:

- Bibles
- stationery or note card for each person
- pens

Invite a volunteer to read Philemon 1:1–9 to the group. Ask each participant to think about someone in his or her life to whom the participant would write a short supportive or instructive note. Invite learners to share as they feel comfortable. Distribute stationery or note cards and invite them to write this person. Tell them that it is up to them whether or not they send the notes.

### 8 Prayers of Youth at Confirmation

**Leader preparation:** Prayer is often a forward looking activity. David's prayer in 2 Samuel 7:18–29 looks forward to God's never-ending blessings on David and his people. In a similar fashion, Paul spoke of his hopes for the future in his letter to Philemon. Perhaps no group better represents our own future hopes and dreams than the youth of our faith communities. Look over the online article "Prayers of Youth at Confirmation."

**Supplies:**

- copy for each person of the online article "Prayers of Youth at Confirmation," <http://www.ucc.org/assets/pdfs/br7.pdf>
- journal, small notebook, or paper for each person

Give each person a copy of "Prayers of Youth at Confirmation" and invite one volunteer to read the introduction to the group. Invite another person to read Carrie's prayer to the group. Invite the participants to write a prayer about their own faith journey and future hopes. Invite participants to share their prayers, as they feel comfortable, at this session or at your following session.

### 9 Holy Conversation

**Leader preparation:** We tend to think that God either speaks through events (mundane or cataclysmic) or can only be encountered closely in prayer or in ritual worship. But, in order to be aware of where God is calling us, we have to listen to multiple inputs that involve conversations with ourselves and with others with whom we are in relationship.

In a letter, Paul tells Philemon a story that involves himself, Philemon, and the runaway slave Onesimus. He helps Philemon better understand and reshape his own story in order that both he and Onesimus can live out the future that God intends for them. Watch the video on the UCC website's page entitled "Richard Peace on the Holy Conversation Project." Using the pull-down menu under the video, pay special attention to the clip "On the spiritual discipline of noticing God." In this video snippet, Peace says that we need to notice God in "our encounters with one another where God is present."

Think about the ways that God has been present to you recently. In what form did these encounters come? Did any of them come during communication (written, electronic, verbal and nonverbal) with others? How did you respond? Be prepared to tell the group about your recent encounter(s) with God, and to help them reflect upon their own in pairs. In order to be fully prepared, you may want to watch all of the video clips on the webpage.

**Supplies:**

- computer with Internet access
- digital projector
- video: "On the spiritual discipline of noticing God," found online at "Richard Peace on The Holy Conversation Project," <http://www.ucc.org/vitality/ready-set-grow/video/richard-peace.html>

Tell the group that God speaks to us in a variety of ways. Point out the ways in which Paul used the intersecting stories of himself, Philemon, and Onesimus to help guide Philemon (and Onesimus) toward a better future with God. Show the



video “On the spiritual discipline of noticing God.” Share with them some of your recent God encounters, and ask them to reflect momentarily upon ways that God has been present to them. Ask them to reflect on what form these encounters came, if any of them came during communication (written, electronic, verbal and nonverbal) with others. Invite them to share how they responded.

Have the group form small groups of two or three people and tell one another the Good News of their Holy Conversations. If time allows, the pairs may want to share the fruits of their interactions with the larger group. Send the whole group forth with a willingness and openness to encounter God in others in the coming days. If group dynamics and schedules allow, make this time of shared reflection a normal part of your gathering together.

### Reflect

How will you and your congregation worship and pray your way into the future God has planned for you? What will this look like? What part of it is already taking shape in your life and the life of the congregation?

Attachment: Activity 2

### Unison Prayer of Confession

Holy God, the ills of this world seem to render us helpless. We are overwhelmed by the magnitude of need around us. Some of us are hungry and homeless. Some do not earn a fair wage. Others cannot find meaningful work. There are wars and rumors of wars. We fear violence in our streets and in our homes. We want peace, but it eludes us. We seek signs of hope, O God. Tell us you are near and save us from despair.

Most merciful God, help us this day to know that you are as close to us as our own breath. Bind us together as a community to work for equality and justice. Help us to live in covenant with you, valuing and loving others as we would ourselves. Forgive us when we lose heart. Shape us as a people alive in your spirit. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

#### The Assurance of Pardon

**One:** God hears our prayer.

**All:** We know this is true.

**One:** God's forgiveness embraces us.

**All:** This is good news for all.

#### The Passing of the Peace

**One:** Please greet one another with a sign of peace such as a handshake or embrace.

Attachment: Activity 3

**Excerpt from Rev. John Robinson's Prayer**

We are now erelong to part asunder, and the Lord knoweth whether I shall live ever to see your faces more. But whether the Lord hath appointed it or not, I charge you before God and His blessed angels to follow me no farther than I have followed Christ. If God should reveal anything to you by any other instrument of His, be as ready to receive it as ever you were to receive any truth of my ministry; for I am very confident the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth out of His holy word.

EXCERPT OF A PRAYER BY REV. JOHN ROBINSON, ON THE OCCASION OF THE PILGRIMS SAILING FROM LEYDEN, HOLLAND, TO DEPART FOR NORTH AMERICA. FOUND ONLINE AT [HTTP://WWW.UCC.ORG/VITALITY/WHAT-MATTERS/WE-LISTEN-FOR-A.HTML](http://www.ucc.org/vitality/what-matters/we-listen-for-a.html)

Attachment: Activity 5

## Barmen Declaration

In view of the errors of the "German Christians" and of the present Reich Church Administration, which are ravaging the Church and at the same time also shattering the unity of the German Evangelical Church, we confess the following evangelical truths:

1. "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through me."  
*John 14:6*

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold through the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved."  
*John 10:1, 9*

Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

We reject the false doctrine that the Church could and should recognize as a source of its proclamation, beyond and besides this one Word of God, yet other events, powers, historic figures and truths as God's revelation.

2. "Jesus Christ has been made wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption for us by God." *1 Cor. 1:30*

As Jesus Christ is God's comforting pronouncement of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, with equal seriousness, he is also God's vigorous announcement of his claim upon our whole life. Through him there comes to us joyful liberation from the godless ties of this world for free, grateful service to his creatures.

We reject the false doctrine that there could be areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ but to other lords, areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.

3. "Let us, however, speak the truth in love, and in every respect grow into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body is joined together." *Eph. 4:15-16*

The Christian Church is the community of brethren in which, in Word and Sacrament, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ acts in the present as Lord. With both its faith and its obedience, with both its message and its order, it has to testify in the midst of the sinful world, as the Church of pardoned sinners, that it belongs to him alone and lives and may live by his comfort and under his direction alone, in expectation of his appearing.

We reject the false doctrine that the Church could have permission to hand over the form of its message and of its order to whatever it itself might wish or to the vicissitudes of the prevailing ideological and political convictions of the day.



### Attachment: Activity 5 (*continued*)

4. "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to have authority over you must be your servant." *Matt. 20:25-26*

The various offices in the Church do not provide a basis for some to exercise authority over others but for the ministry (lit., "service") with which the whole community has been entrusted and charged to be carried out.

We reject the false doctrine that, apart from this ministry, the Church could, and could have permission to, give itself or allow itself to be given special leaders (Führer) vested with ruling authority.

5. "Fear God. Honor the Emperor." *1 Pet. 2:17*

Scripture tells us that by divine appointment the State, in this still unredeemed world in which also the Church is situated, has the task of maintaining justice and peace, so far as human discernment and human ability make this possible, by means of the threat and use of force. The Church acknowledges with gratitude and reverence toward God the benefit of this, his appointment. It draws attention to God's Dominion (Reich), God's commandment and justice, and with these the responsibility of those who rule and those who are ruled. It trusts and obeys the power of the Word, by which God upholds all things.

We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission the State should and could become the sole and total order of human life and so fulfill the vocation of the Church as well.

We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission the Church should and could take on the nature, tasks and dignity which belong to the State and thus become itself an organ of the State.

6. "See, I am with you always, to the end of the age." *Matt. 28:20* "God's Word is not fettered." *2 Tim. 2:9*

The Church's commission, which is the foundation of its freedom, consists in this: in Christ's stead, and so in the service of his own Word and work, to deliver all people, through preaching and sacrament, the message of the free grace of God.

We reject the false doctrine that with human vainglory the Church could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of self-chosen desires, purposes and plans.

The Confessing Synod of the German Evangelical Church declares that it sees in the acknowledgment of these truths and in the rejection of these errors the indispensable theological basis of the German Evangelical Church as a confederation of Confessing Churches. It calls upon all who can stand in solidarity with its Declaration to be mindful of these theological findings in all their decisions concerning Church and State. It appeals to all concerned to return to unity in faith, hope and love.